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Another year of trying to keep up with the ever-changing covid restrictions; another year of trying to understand what other people are saying even though their video is jerky and the audio comes in bursts.

In this year's set of philosophical rambling, political polemic and personal trivia, you will learn how and why not do to lots of things: why you shouldn't bother calling us from Berlin, what not to cook for your daughter-in-law, how not to hunt sheep, and why it's not worth watching German television on Sunday afternoons (or indeed at any other time).

But don't get disheartened: it's not all negative. You will also learn why you should appreciate your ears, why boring politicians are good, why Ursula von der Leyen is on the mailing list for this letter, and how to get a job driving a lorry in the UK. As a bonus, you can teach yourself braille and learn why the latest covid variant is called omicron and not some other letter of the Greek alphabet.



Evelyn's new e-bike: faster than walking (but not much)

January

MÜLLENBERG – It is an utter delight to wake up to zero news about the US president's latest tweet. The last four years have been a nightmare: one lie after another, one awful decision after another. Give me boring politicians any day.

The US came alarmingly close. The world would look rather different if Trump had actually won a few thousand more votes in a few key states: just imagine the further damage he could have done. Or if a few key election officials in those states had not been honest? Or if the House of Representatives had had a Republican majority? Or if the mob that invaded the Capitol had burst through different doors and captured – and hanged – a few of the representatives who were just a few feet away? As Biden himself said, democracy is fragile.

Compare Trump with other megalomaniac dictators such as (to pull a name out of a hat) Alexander Lukashenko. They cling onto power by suborning the judiciary, the police, army and the election system, as well as by controlling or muzzling the media. Trump tried systematically to do this for the last four years – and failed. The election system functioned – within the limitations imposed by gerrymandering and the crazily archaic Electoral College. The judiciary rejected Trump's ludicrous attempts to overturn the election results. The police did not attack anti-regime demonstrators (though they had done so

earlier in the largely peaceful Black Lives Matter protests). The army did not step in to preserve Trump in power. Most of the media continued to report the facts (except Murdoch mouthpieces such as Fox "News" that had already sold their souls to the devil).

For all its flaws, the American system showed that it was strong enough not to succumb to four years of blatant lies and rabble-rousing from the person in charge. Now it has to show it is capable of healing the divisions that Trump has created and exacerbated. And it has to make sure that no one like him can ever come to power again.

MÜLLENBERG – We read bedtime stories to Emily, in Rome, via Skype. We scan a children's book and share it on our screen. She hasn't quite understood that we cannot see what she is pointing to on the screen. And she hides behind a pillow if a story gets scary.



Emily demonstrating some useful positions to prevent back pain

February

MÜLLENBERG – It's not just Skype: we are also now experts on Zoom, Teams, Whatsapp, Facebook Messenger, Signal, Twitter, BlueJeans, LinkedIn and ChurchX (yes, really). In addition, of course, to plain old email. Even if, like me, you boycott Instagram and Tiktok, there are now far too many ways of keeping in touch with your colleagues, friends and "friends". I spend more time trying to remember the channel that someone has contacted me on than in actually responding to that person.

We rarely make normal phone calls. We get so many junk calls purporting to be from "Microsoft" that we have stopped answering the phone if the display shows a Berlin dialling code, where "Microsoft" appears to live. So if you are in Berlin, don't bother calling by phone. Use Skype instead. Or Zoom. Or anything except Instagram and Tiktok.

March

ZISCHENDORF, BAVARIA – The German covid restrictions permitted up to five adults from two separate households. So Evelyn and I took turns to visit Julia's parents while Oliver,

Julia and Emily were staying there. Emily proved perfectly capable of keeping all five adults fully employed. It took adult guile to counter this. A visit to the playground? Not only did this keep Emily busy for an hour or so; it also gave the other four adults time to get on with their day jobs.

April

ZISCHENDORF – Julia doesn't think much of my cooking. I had brought a couple of quiches with me to Bavaria as an offering to the household gods. Julia refused a second slice. "Tastes strange", she said. I was forced to admit the accident I had had with the powdered nutmeg while mixing the ingredients. Julia will have to make do with my grilled courgettes (see *August*).

May

BERGISCH GLADBACH – Finally it was the turn of the over-60s to get a jab. It's a routine that we have all had to get used to: make an appointment online, turn up, show your identity card, fill in the form, sit and wait for your turn in a room set up like a school examination hall without the tables. Our vaccination centre was in a basement without a mobile phone signal. I knew this beforehand, so had brought a magazine to read. My fellow jabbees had not: They were condemned to stare forlornly at their mobiles.

Go through the magic doorway, roll up your sleeve, exchange some pleasantries with the kind soul delivering the jab, and file out to wait 15 minutes in case some rare side-effect kicks in. (It didn't.)

MÜLLENBERG – The antivax crowd seems to fall into two groups: the poorly informed, and the well-misinformed. The poorly informed include many refugees. A common misconception is that the jab will make them infertile (it won't). I have been running an information service via Whatsapp (yes, social media again) for the refugees in Kürten to tell them about where, how and why to get vaccinated, along with other stuff like when the buses are on strike and what the latest covid restrictions are.

The well-misinformed antivaxxers are a bigger problem. In Germany they euphemistically call themselves *Querdenker* (alternative thinkers). They promulgate a hodgepodge of easily debunked conspiracy theories: Bill Gates is going to track your every movement through an invisible microchip embedded in your arm (physically impossible even if one were injected because of the energy requirements needed to power such a chip), the vaccine may have unknown long-term side-effects (nonsense: it is broken down in the body after a couple of days), the vaccine is riskier than getting covid (check out the mortality statistics) and the covid virus doesn't really exist (sigh).

Overcoming this and similar nonsense is a real challenge for our times. When fiction replaces facts, when made-up posts on social media become more credible than science or responsible journalism, then society has a big problem (see *January*).

If there is one thing that annoys me most about such naysayers, it is their comparing themselves with the Jews in Nazi Germany. They regard themselves as victims of the broader society, marked out for oppression. This is not only utter bullshit; it is also an insult to the memory of the millions of people who were murdered by the Nazis simply because of who they were. It is the antivaxxers who put the rest of society at risk, and not the other way around.

MÜLLENBERG – I've been working on a map of pastoralists around the world (check it out at tinyurl.com/pastoralistmap). It shows hundreds of groups of herders around the world who keep cattle, sheep, goats, buffalo, reindeer, yaks or ducks (yes,

duck-herding is common in parts of Asia). The idea is to map these groups and describe their lifestyles and production systems. The Turkana and the Mongols herd their animals from place to place in search of sparse grazing. The Bedouin used to herd camels; now they carry sheep around in lorries. Hill farmers in Britain leave their sheep outside most of the time, bringing them in a couple of times a year for shearing and to take off the lambs. Transhumants in the Alps and Central Asia drive their animals up to mountain pastures in summer and down to the valleys in autumn.

It's all very environmentally friendly, but still not enough to appease the gods. In the middle of my online presentation to launch the map, a thunderstorm directly overhead cut our internet, leaving me talking into an empty microphone and the participants gazing at a blank screen.

MÜLLENBERG – Few Brits have ever heard of Rosamunde Pilcher, but she's a household name in Germany. She was a British author who wrote romantic novels, almost invariably set in Cornwall. Some 160 dramas based on her novels have been filmed for German television. These soppy tearjerkers air virtually daily on TV here. Ms Pilcher received a British Tourism Award for attracting hordes of German tourists to southwestern England each year.

Evelyn is addicted, even though the romantic tension somehow causes her blood pressure to go through the roof. I have pointed out to her several times, to no avail, that the films are entirely predictable. Here's a handy guide.

Central characters:

- A young woman, who early in the film falls in love with...
- A young man: handsome but impoverished.
- A second young man, also good-looking but richer.
- An elderly aunt or uncle, owner of...
- A large country house with astronomical heating costs.
- A cliff-top road.

Rules for shooting:

- All characters are fluent in German, the lingua franca of southwest England.
- No one ever does any work. Snipping flowers in garden, OK; but earning a crust through honest toil, no.
- All dialogue scenes are shot either in the large country house or on beaches that have been cleared of tourists for the purpose of filming.
- All driving is done along clifftop roads that link nowhere with nowhere else. Such roads are sites for key plot elements such as the heroine meeting first (or second) young man, or driving off the cliff (thereby precipitating plot denouement). The film crew have not discovered that most travel in Cornwall is in fact along the A30, an unscenic dual carriageway that links Land's End with London.
- It never rains in Cornwall. Never. Cornwall must be full of German film crews waiting for a break in the rain so they can get on with shooting the next scene.
- Most scenes are in fact shot in Devon or Dorset, not Cornwall.

Central plotline (no deviations allowed):

1. Young woman arrives in Cornwall (returns to ancestral home/joins the staff of posh hotel/is stranded on road). She meets first young man and falls in love.
2. She meets second young man, whom she fails to identify as a snake/swindler/bigamist.

3. She has a misunderstanding with first young man. They fail to discuss how the misunderstanding has arisen. They part company.
4. She falls into arms of second young man.
5. A subplot reveals a series of underhand intrigues perpetrated by second young man.
6. A crisis occurs (accident on clifftop road/overheard conversation/arrival of real wife of bigamist).
7. Young woman finally detects underhand intrigues of second young man. Second young man departs from the storyline.
8. First young man resurfaces. Young woman falls into his arms again.
9. Elderly aunt or uncle dies. Young woman inherits country house and its heating costs.

June

MÜLLENBERG – It's bad news if Evelyn emerges from the house within 48 hours of me doing the mowing. She failed to credit me for preserving the clump of ox-eye daisies (*Leucanthemum vulgare*) growing in the middle of the path, instead spotting the neatly trimmed patch of columbines (*Aquilegia vulgaris*) outside the door. She glared at me, the severed stems in her hand. I pointed out that these were weeds, like most other plants in our garden, and that the garden was full of them. "But they were the only blue-and-white ones we had!" she said, putting the columbines in a vase. I went to sit on the naughty step until they had wilted.

MÜLLENBERG – Mowing is not the only challenge in our garden. It rains too much, or not at all. It is too hot, or too cold. Insects and birds turn a promising seedbed into a barren wasteland. Significant others trample over newly sown vegetable beds (perhaps to avenge the demise of their columbines?).

To top all these problems, there are the plastic pots that you use to sow seeds in. These may be round or square, come in a bewildering variety of diameters and depths, and none of them stack inside the others. At the end of the planting season, the hapless gardener is left with a chaotic pile of pots and has to spend hours sorting out which ones will fit together so they do not take over what little space remains in the shed.

And then there are the trays that hold the pots. Each tray can hold six, or eight, or maybe ten pots; and again, there is no standardization. Some of the trays are even exact mirror images of each other: they both hold 8 pots, but cannot be stacked when they are empty.

So here's a plea, and a threat, to the seed-pot-manufacturing industry. Get your act together! Standardize your products, or I will send this Christmas letter to Ursula von der Leyen.

July

CIAMPINO AIRPORT, ROME, ITALY – We dragged our suitcases to the only piece of shade on the road to wait for Oliver to pick us up. Just as we arrived, Evelyn's suitcase got stuck in a pothole and she tripped, bruising her toe. That put paid to any plans to wander around ruins or hike up mountains while in Italy.

When in Rome, do as the Romans do. That means spending your mornings in a café sipping espresso and munching croissants, your afternoons eating ice cream, and your evenings in a restaurant. We also got to know all the playgrounds within hobbling distance of Oliver and Julia's flat. And after Emily had had her fill of the slides and climbing frames, she needed no persuasion to try out more ice cream.



When in Rome...

August

MÜLLENBERG – Perhaps it's the noise, or maybe the vibrations? Bees don't like mowers. The trick is to mow one strip in front of the hives at a time, then beat a retreat until the bees have calmed down, before coming back to mow another strip.

The bees were already uppity when I mowed the first strip, and then got even more uppity when the mower collided with the end hive and knocked it over. Bees can fly faster than I can run. I shut myself in the garage instead to don gloves and a veil so I could rebuild the hive without getting stung too many more times.

MÜLLENBERG – Evelyn once again threatened divorce (or worse) if I planted more courgettes than we could consume ourselves. To no avail: we harvested 70 before we lost count. We tried to give them away, but the neighbours also grow courgettes – though in sensible quantities. I loaded up my bike trailer and cycled round the refugee houses to give away as many as I could. Evelyn didn't notice that I smuggled several armfuls indoors and surreptitiously added them to the crates of courgettes in the spare room.



At time of writing, I'm still married

September

OUESSANT, FINISTÈRE, FRANCE – The world's smallest breed of sheep hails from Ouessant, an island off the end of Brittany (next stop, Newfoundland), and is a deserving candidate for inclusion in the Pastoral Map (see May).

Reason enough for a visit. My sister Liz and her husband Steve, who live in Brittany, booked a ferry, and we scoured the island for the famed sheep. Nothing doing: Ouessant is beautiful, but the only sheep we saw were definitely not Ouessants. To add insult to injury, we saw a map on the return ferry showing the most scenic stretches of Ouessant: the bits we had not seen.



Brittany: like Cornwall but without the German film crews

Time for some research. Mr Google told us that the Ouessant breed had died out on the island, but had been preserved by aristocrats on the mainland who used them as lawnmowers around their chateaux.

I apologised profusely to Liz and Steve for the wasted journey. Next time we go sheepspotting, we'll do the due diligence first.



Left: On Ouessant, but not Ouessants. Right: Ouessants off Ouessant

ROSCOFF, FRANCE – Crossing borders has become an expensive hassle, especially where the UK is concerned. To get into Belgium or France you need to fill in a form and prove you've been vaccinated. To get into the UK you also need a PCR test (we did ours in Brest airport), and you must pay for a second test you take within 48 hours after your arrival in Blighty. Then fill in more forms to get back into France, and Belgium, and Germany. We ended up with a folderful of paperwork. The rules change every two days depending on the ebbs and flows of the pandemic and the political whims in each country. At least the EU tries to coordinate the rules. The UK does not. (I think that's called "taking back control".)

PLYMOUTH, UK – "Have you been to any French islands in the last 14 days?" I think the British health authorities were more interested in the Caribbean paradises of Guadeloupe and Martinique, which at the time had astronomical covid incidences. But Ouessant is indeed a French island, as is the Île de Sieck, which we had also visited (though that is connected to the mainland by a tidal sandbank, so I'm not sure it counts). We filled in the form truthfully, and the immigration officials in Plymouth duly ignored it.



Tintern Abbey – a rare outing for Sheila. Thank you, Ledbury Road

Mr Google said that a full tank would take our car 396 miles. Distance from Plymouth to Herefordshire to Dover: 405 miles. We had filled up in Roscoff, but would have to drive sparingly, or risk having to push the car onto the boat in Dover.

There was one pump still working at the Ledbury Road filling station in Hereford, so did not have to sneak out at night to siphon anyone else's tank. We even had enough fuel to take Sheila for an outing to Tintern, a ruined abbey in the Wye valley.

DOVER, UK – We passed numerous filling stations on the way from Hereford to Dover. Not one had any fuel. We obviously understand that the fuel crisis in the UK "has nothing to do with Brexit", and that continental Europe also has a shortage of lorry drivers. But why is it that there are no fuel shortages on the continent and that the supermarkets there are fully stocked?

The British government is trying to persuade Germans, whose car driving licenses permit them to drive light trucks, to come to the UK to help alleviate the logistics crisis. That includes Evelyn and me. We have not yet taken up this tempting offer.

MÜLLENBERG – Many countries have politics, and politicians, that make your blood boil. Not so Germany. The election campaign was tepid, and the politicians, apart from a far-right antivax racist fringe, hardly keep you on the edge of your seat. The biggest arguments were about whether to impose a speed limit on the Autobahns (the new government has inexplicably decided against) and whether to declare an end the pandemic even though it is still in full swing (inexplicably decided in favour). Both decisions were sponsored by the FDP, the pro-business liberal party, the odd one out in a three-way coalition of socialists and greens. Angela Merkel bowed out as easily the country's most popular politician, despite the last few years of drift and indecision. Time for a change.

October

MÜLLENBERG – Whenever Oliver and Emily visit, we get out Oliver's old Lego sets – ostensibly for Emily to play with, but in reality for her father to do so. He made her a pirate ship, and then it was her turn. She walked the Lego captain down from the forecastle to the main deck to inspect that all was shipshape. "Oh no, no internet!" cried the captain. Emily has learned what is important in the modern world.

November

HUIZEN, NETHERLANDS – Louis Braille invented the writing system named after him in the 1820s. Designed for the blind, it uses patterns of embossed dots that you can feel with your

fingertips. Each letter or punctuation mark is represented by up to six dots. For blind people, this system is vital for their education, communication and independence.

Visio, the Dutch organization for the blind and visually impaired, has asked me to help them write a couple of books for developing countries: on how to teach braille, and on how to teach mathematics to blind people. Computer programs can now read out loud what is on a computer screen, and let you write by dictating into a microphone. But computers are rare in schools in the developing world, and the education of blind kids is often neglected. Hence the need for these books.

MÜLLENBERG – If you’re going to help write a book about a topic, you’d better know something about it. I’ve made a set of braille cards, one for each letter of the alphabet and the numbers from 0 to 9. Evelyn is learning too: each evening, we sit with the shuffled deck of cards, eyes closed, running our fingertips over patterns of dots.

The braille alphabet is below. The first row of letters (*a–j*) uses the first two rows of dots in the six-dot cell. The second and third rows of letters (*k–t* and *u–z*) are the same as *a–j*, with the addition of one or two dots in the bottom row in each cell. The exception is *w*, which was not part of the French alphabet in the 1820s. The numbers are the same as the letters *a–j*, but are preceded by the number sign ♫. A multi-digit number needs just one number sign to begin with. (Pay attention, there's a test at the end of this page.)

MÜLLENBERG – The World Health Organization is working its way through the Greek alphabet. We've had covid-19 variants alpha (α), beta (β), gamma (γ), delta (δ), all the way up to mu (μ , the Greek letter m). The next available letter was nu (ν , which looks like a v but is in fact the Greek letter n). WHO skipped it because they thought it sounded like “new”. The next letter in the Greek alphabet is xi (ξ). Not politically clever to have a covid variant that might be associated with the president of China, so WHO has landed us with omicron (\omicron). Next up is pi (π). Expect a host of protests from aggrieved mathematicians who'd prefer that WHO skip to rho (ρ) or sigma (σ). Which would upset the statisticians. Tau (τ) or upsilon (υ), anyone? And what will they do after they get to omega (ω)?

December

BERGISCH GLADBACH, GERMANY – Our personal space has expanded. It used to be an arm's length. But now, if you come within a couple of metres of anyone, they will eye you warily and adjust their mask. Cough, and they will look at you with alarm and shuffle away, and you must mutter an apology and assure them that you are fully vaccinated. A queue that used to barely make it out of the door now stretches around the block. I counted 120 people in the line for our covid booster jab. One and a half hours of waiting was not too bad. If this were Indonesia or Kenya, there would be hawkers working the queue selling trinkets, snacks and magazines. This being Germany,



The end of a socially distanced queue

there was no such entertainment: the queue shuffled forward in silence, interrupted only by queueers objecting to someone else cutting in.

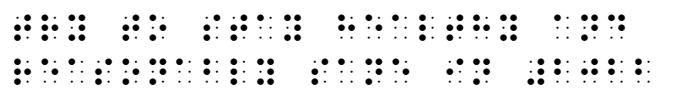
When Evelyn and I got to the front, we were vaccinated by a young man who turned out to be the brother of one of Oliver's school friends. Who says that queuing for a jab can't be a nice experience?

MÜLLENBERG – Ears are underappreciated bits of the human anatomy. Not only do they provide the senses of hearing and balance; they also team up with the nose as a convenient perch for spectacles. And they help hold the now-ubiquitous face masks in place.

Maybe my head is bigger than the EU standard, but the elastic loops on the masks are too small: I can feel the tension in the elastic as it gradually pulls my auricles forward, and the mask flips off. This also dislodges my glasses and clip-on earmuffs, leaving me inhaling virus-laden air while I grope on the ground to rescue them. I am considering stapling a strip of Velcro to my ears to hold everything in place.

ZISCHENDORF – Emily was quickly bored by the family Boxing Day game of Monopoly. She absconded with the bank, and proceeded to lay out streets with houses and hotels on another table in the room. All went well until the Monopoly players started needing houses to boost the rental value of their properties. She objected to Julia trying to remove some of “her” houses so she could put them on the Monopoly board. End of game. At least we can all claim to have won, or rather, not to have lost.

We wish you a very happy Diwali, Maulid, Christmas, Hanukkah, New Year, Chūnjié, Tsagaan sar, Tét and Norooz. And just to check whether you've been paying attention:



Paul and Evelyn



Emily keeping 6 adults (including the photographer) busy