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January 2002

BERGISCH GLADBACH, GERMANY — Our bedroom looked like the winter décor in our local pharmacy: a lively range of inhalants, cough suppressants, headache pills, and goo to rub into our chests. Allopathic, homeopathic, organic: we tried them all. We propped ourselves up on mountains of pillows and entertained the neighbours with cough duets. Evelyn's imagination for cures knew no bounds: syrup from a diced onion mixed with sugar; tea made from sliced ginger; drops of liquid to be held in the mouth for as long as possible (usually about three seconds before the next bout of coughing).

Watery-eyed, I chose a new medicine from the shelf-ful and scanned the tiny type on the instruction leaflet. 'Take 20–40 drops', it said. I measured 30 into a spoon, swallowed – and collapsed in the biggest fit of coughing this side of Vesuvius. I had missed the instructions saying to dilute the drops in water or tea, so my tonsils were bathed with full-strength medicine.



Oliver looking cool, Evelyn looking hot, and Paul I ooking wet.

I would like to be able to report that Evelyn and Oliver knew exactly what to do in an emergency: give me a glass of water and sue the pharmaceuticals firm. No, they didn't have the presence of mind for either. Evelyn was laughing too much to move. Oliver rushed off in search of a camera to record the occasion for posterity.

BERLIN – Getting off the train, Evelyn felt a tug on her rucksack. She turned round to find two disappointed pickpockets: the rucksack contained a two-day-old sandwich and an apple she had packed for the trip. So did she try to attract attention? Did she call the police? Did she aim a swift kick at the pickpocket's groin (like she does with me when I get too frisky)? No – her quick-thinking response to prevent further attempts at theft was... eat the apple.

February

BERGISCH GLADBACH – Email from the administrator of a development communication website I subscribe to: I'm their 'featured consultant' this week: my name will appear in a 'teaser box' at the top of the webpage. I was doubly pleased when Evelyn informed me that a 'teaser' is a bull that a farmer lets into a field of cows to identify which ones are in heat. But then she added that the teaser bull never actually gets any of the action: his sole function is to point out to the farmer which cows are ready for artificial insemination. If you hear me mooing at young women, you'll know why.

March

BOGOR, INDONESIA –A steady stream of wedding guests filed into the tiny house, stuffing envelopes of cash into a box by the door as they entered. They greeted the bride and groom, dressed in traditional Sundanese black-and-gold wedding garb, and then queued up for a meal of rice, chicken and vegetables. Special guests (I was one) had to pose for photographs.

I went back a couple of weeks later to see how they were getting on. The bride was happy enough, but her grandmother pulled me to one side. The wedding had cost 4 million rupiah – about €400. Despite a hefty contribution from the groom's parents, the envelopes of cash didn't nearly cover the costs. 'Lots of people gave only 1000 rupiah' (about 10 cents), she said, 'and four of the envelopes were empty' – someone had got a free meal. So granny was €0 short. A lot of money if you're on €1 a day. To cap it all, something must have been wrong with the camera – the photos all came out with people's heads chopped off.

May

BOGOR – 'They're desperate – they'll take just about anyone', said my friend Doug. A Chinese film crew was in town making a docudrama about the 1955 Bandung Asia–Africa Conference. Doug wanted me to audition as an unpaid movie extra.

He was right. The casting director sized me up and told me I would be a reporter. But over the five nights of the shoot, I didn't hold a single pencil. Instead, I was successively a conference delegate from Gold Coast, Ceylon, Egypt, Ethiopia and Iraq. I

appeared in shots greeting Haile Selassie (I asked him whether his beard was fake), sitting next to Nasser, and swigging Chianti (er, strawberry-flavoured fizzy drink) behind Soekarno and Zhou Enlai. No, the director didn't notice that I was wearing a different suit and tie in each shot, and in the final one I was sunburned after a day spent at the pool learning how to dive (see below).

I even got them to change the script. The actor playing Nehru said that Nasser was to present him with an Egyptian lion cub, but that the local safari park (the nearest source of feline extras) only had tigers. I told Nehru there were no tigers in Africa. He rushed off to consult the director, who added the words 'from the zoo in Cairo' to the script.



If only I'd known before the effect that wearing a tie has on women...

The other extras were a fascinating crowd. I leave you to judge the Indonesians from the picture above. The Africans were mainly businessmen who smuggled Indonesian textiles into West Africa. And there was a bunch of Iraqis – all refugees, including two survivors from a boat that sank last year on its way to Australia with the loss of 300 lives. They were waiting for UNHCR to send them to their new homes in Canada, Norway and the UK. I cheered them up by telling them that all three have miserable weather.

I didn't get a scene with Indira Gandhi (Nehru's daughter), but she did at least try to teach me how to act (see photo on the right).

If you want to see the film, be in Beijing in October 2003. The crowd-pulling title? *Zhou Enlai in Bandung*.

June

KOTOK BESAR ISLAND, INDONESIA – The resort had run out of boats, so the police lent us theirs for my final training dive. We went down to look at the coral, and I resurfaced as a newly qualified Open Water Scuba Diver.

Then the outboard failed to start. Visions of drifting for weeks across the Java Sea with half a bottle of water between the five of us... They eventually got the motor going, and we limped back to Kotok Besar. It's the place to be if you're into smuggling and piracy – you're safe from the police with their dodgy outboard. You can even do some diving while you await arrest.



As I said, it's the tie...

The Thousand Islands archipelago, just off Jakarta, has four types of islands: uninhabited nature reserves, impoverished fishing communities, resorts (like Kotok Besar), and private sanctuaries for the elite. Some of the poorest people in Indonesia watch some of the richest zoom by in speedboats. Next to Kotok Besar is one of the private islands: it has just been bought by a crony of Tommy Suharto's (the former president's playboy son). The crony paid cash after serving a year in prison for corruption. He is turning it into a weekend getaway – for his smuggler and pirate friends?

July

BERLIN, GERMANY – More people visit the Reichstag (the German parliament building) every day than the Louvre. We watched them queuing up outside – while we went on our own private tour of the bits the Great Unwashed don't get to see, led by a cousin of Evelyn's who is a Member of Parliament. He promised to get me a Luftwaffe airsickness bag signed by the Minister of Defence. But I'm out of luck: the minister resigned in a scandal a few days later. Maybe the press got wind of my airsickness bag?

LEVERKUSEN, GERMANY – Oliver is delighted. His basketball team may have lost the game 25–3, but he did score two of his team's points. Evelyn and I have joined him in the badminton club, where we are learning to pretend that the shuttlecock fell just inside the line, and to swear at the ones that obviously did not. And Evelyn has taken up karate, and has wrenched her knee trying to kick an opponent. At least she can't kick me when I don't follow her orders...

August

STOKE PRIOR, HEREFORDSHIRE, UK — 'Help—there's a pink worm on the screen!' I've given my old desktop computer to my mother. This was a mistake. In computer jargon, she's a 'newbie'. We have lengthy international phone calls to diagnose problems like a 'football when I click' and how to insert a floppy disk. She's actually managed to send me three emails—but can't remember how. I've managed to work out what the football is (the cursor changes into a circle with arrows in it if you're scrolling in a webpage). But I've no idea what the pink worm is. Any ideas? Let me know so I can enlighten my mother.

HEREFORD, UK – Six cubic feet of polystyrene beans is a *lot* of beans. They came in a large blue plastic bag, which we forced into the back seat of the car. It billowed up behind us as we drove back to Stansted Airport, where we checked them in as 'Fragile' (we didn't want them leaking all over the plane's cargo hold). The beans failed to arrive at Cologne–Bonn airport, though. They were delivered to our apartment the next day, with neat holes in the bag where Customs had stuck in their drugsniffing gadget. The holes had been taped up again, but were still gently leaking beans. We imagined the Customs officers scratching their heads over why we had exported six cubic feet of polystyrene from Britain to Germany.

Why? We couldn't find any beans to buy in Germany. Our floor cushions are now healthily plump, and we can now sit, rather that lie, in them as we watch TV.

SPIEKEROOG, GERMANY – Highlight of Oliver's stay on this North Sea island? One of his friends playfully aimed a kick at another's backside, but hit his leg instead, spraining her toe. She spent the rest of the holiday limping across sand dunes and dragging her foot through mudflats. That will teach her to wear boots.

PLOUESCAT, FRANCE – Oliver and I can now sail a catamaran around the bay. We can also race sand-yachts – if there's enough wind. And the French are still confused about 'beach engineering': I told several questioners that I was digging a canal to divert the English Channel inland. And Evelyn? At the start of the ten days in Brittany, she said it would take just a week of daily walks along the wet sand to harden her against colds and infections. By the end of the holiday, she said it would take another two weeks, and she was sounding distinctly sniffly. My new wetsuit is snug (see picture at the beginning). Now all I have to do is remember to hold my stomach in while walking past the bikinis on the beach.

September

BANJARMASIN, INDONESIA – I could see the s moke as we came in to land – long, white plumes drifting across the flat landscape. The fires, and the smog they produce, are an annual feature during the dry season in Sumatra and Kalimantan. Pressure groups say firms burn the forest so they can plant oil palm. The firms blame squatters who want to grow crops. Legitimate farmers clear brush from their land the only way they can. Sumatra, Kalimantan, Singapore and Malaysia choke under the haze: airports closed, people wearing breathing masks in the streets, hospitals clogged with wheezing patients. Unfortunately the smog rarely reaches Jakarta, so the government is under little pressure to do anything to reduce it.

BERGISCH GLADBACH – Opticians beware: Evelyn needs a new pair of glasses. She's tried all the opticians within a radius of 10 km, and has had at least six pairs made. All make her dizzy or give her headaches. The opticians despair: notices saying 'Closed' or 'Out to lunch' appear in their doorways as she approaches. The circle of opticians we can no longer patronize grows ever wider. Bergisch Gladbach (one of Germany's most opthlamically rich towns) is already a no-go area. She has moved on to Cologne. Leverkusen and Bonn come next.



Another indigenous castration method

October

JAKARTA, INDONESIA – We stopped just outside the '3-in-1' zone and a young man jumped in the car. We dropped him 500 metres further on and paid him Rp 1000 (about €0.10) for riding with us. The Jakarta government's attempts to control traffic include a zone where every vehicle must carry at least 3 people during the rush hour – or face a stiff fine. If you don't have enough passengers, the solution is to pick up one of the crowd of 'jockeys' who wait at the entrance to the zone.

I'm always impressed at Indonesians' ability to exploit business opportunities. When the Bogor city government raised minibus fares to Rp 700, tables with piles of coins quickly appeared by the roadside. Drivers short of change could stop to buy Rp 900 of coins for Rp 1000 – a 10% profit for the table owner. The tables disappeared again when the fare rose to Rp 1000.

And then there are the umbrella carriers who gather around the entrances of shopping centres and offices when it rains. For a small fee, you can rent a large golf umbrella so you can reach your car reasonably dry (during a tropical downpour it's impossible to stay totally dry, even with an umbrella). The young boys who rent the umbrellas trot beside you, getting drenched. They must be the only people here who pray for rain every day.

MOMBASA, KENYA – The conference on community-based animal healthcare was held at a posh hotel (no, not the one that was blown up by terrorists in November). Evelyn was there to represent the League for Pastoral Peoples, a non-government organization she is treasurer of. She said the only link to poor livestock holders was a well-fed camel that offered rides to tourists on the beach.

November

HAMBURG, GERMANY – No women allowed in the posh Anglo-German Club, except on the two or three days a year the club is rented out. So when Evelyn and colleagues arrived for the ceremony where our friend Ilse was to receive a Rolex Award for her work with pastoralists in Rajasthan, they had to wait. Only when all the club members had left were they admitted. One woman had preceded them, though: Queen Elizabeth was already there, smiling down from her portrait on the wall.

MATAHARI ISLAND, INDONESIA – The sea urchin was lying in wait for me as I climbed out of the water. Twenty poisonous spines embedded themselves in my leg just above my diving boot. The treatment? Pull spines out, pound leg with a lead weight until the puncture wounds bleed, then apply vinegar. I don't know what is more painful: the disease, or the cure. Next time I dive, I'll wear socks.

December

AWASA, ETHIOPIA – Life is tough for the horses and donkeys that rule this town. Donkeys haul carts piled high with straw, bamboo or sacks of grain. Horses trot in front of two-wheeled carriages loaded with people. When they reach the end of their useful lives, the animals are turned loose to fend for themselves – to the delight of the hyenas that make nightly forays into town in search of food.

BERGISCH GLADBACH – Revenge is sweet. Last time I was in Ethiopia, ten years ago, I bought Evelyn a beautiful traditional dress. She never wore it – 'it wasn't her style'. This year I gave her another dress (see picture on the right). She pretended to be delighted, until I told her it was the same dress I had given here ten years before. Now all I have to fear is that she gives me a recycled present next Christmas.

Work, you ask? No, we have not retired to a life of leisure and travel. Six months working on agricultural research communication, training and digital libraries in Indonesia, a writeshop in Addis Ababa, and sundry editing jobs have kept me out of mischief. Evelyn has continued her work with ethnoveterinary medicine, and has expanded into livestock genetic resources. And Oliver is trying hard to prevent schoolwork from distracting him from sport, music, friends and computer games. More at www.mamud.com and www.ethnovetweb.com.

A very happy Christmas, Idul Fitri, Hanukkah and New Year!

Paul, Evelyn and Oliver

