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January 2004

STOKE PRIOR, HEREFORDSHIRE, UK – A "beetle drive" next door to my parents' house. No, nothing to do with Volkswagens: this is a parlour game where you throw dice to complete a drawing of a beetle (6 for a body, 5 for a head, and so on). Bewhiskered retired colonels consume glass after glass of Scotch, and genteel old ladies cheat. A very English way to ring in the New Year.

BERGISCH GLADBACH, GERMANY – At last we're seeing the benefits of Oliver having a girlfriend. Janina's parents helped us move offices from our second-floor flat down into the newly rented basement apartment. Oliver now lords it in the four-room flat upstairs, while Evelyn and I slave away in our two-room dungeon.

Oliver has been doing an internship at a local hospital. He's helped take blood samples, tested diabetic patients, and watched stomach endoscopy. He's since decided against the medical profession: he now wants to be a climatologist.



February

BERGISCH GLADBACH – The men in Evelyn's karate club had gone outside, stripped to their waists and rubbed their chests and backs with snow. The women's changing room afterwards was abuzz, comparing Herr X's pectorals with Herr Y's physique. Evelyn *says* she hadn't even noticed the semi-naked masculinity. I think this is because she's already married to her dream hunk. She thinks it just shows she's getting older.

HANOI, VIETNAM – Forget the dances, architecture, food and clothes. If you want a rich cultural experience, go to have your hair cut. I got a shampoo, a facial massage with acupressure, another shampoo, another facial and scalp massage, and a final rinse and dry. I was then offered a plate of roasted melon seeds... though opening them with my teeth is a skill I've never quite mastered. The hairdresser proceeded to chop off most of the hair she had just spent three-quarters of an hour washing. I hope it grows back fast enough for another visit before I leave Vietnam.

March

HANOI – "The authorities forbid eggs and chickens to be bought", said the letter from the management under my hotel door. Poultry products were banned because of the avian flu outbreak. So off we went in search of eggs. "Are your eggs legal?" I asked in the shop round the corner. The owner showed me her permit, festooned with official-looking stamps. But the hotel management thinks the permit is forged. They suggested we get the shop to cook breakfast for us.

BERGISCH GLADBACH – Inviting our new neighbour round for coffee was the worst thing I could do, said Evelyn. She was busy, she had no time, and the neighbour was an old bat. Then she actually met the neighbour, and realized she was no witch, but a lively 25-year-old. Of course, she was welcome to drop round for coffee "any time". I don't think I'll ever understand female psychology... I'm not allowed to invite elderly women round, but an attractive young blonde is fine?

April

TORREVIEJA, SPAIN – Spontaneous applause broke out as each float descended the church steps and successfully manoeuvred the sharp turn into the crowded street to join the Good Friday procession. Each one bore an image of the crucifixion or a saint, and was carried by up to 40 people. They were accompanied by *nazareños* – men dressed in long, hooded gowns and tall, pointed hats, with holes cut for their eyes. We wondered why they all appeared to be pregnant, then realized they carried bags of sweets inside their gowns to give to the children lining the route.

While Evelyn and I were watching this cultural event, Oliver and Janina went shopping. Later, Evelyn and I drove to the Sierra de Espuña nature reserve; Oliver and Janina went shopping. Then we visited the architectural gems of Barcelona, while Oliver and Janina caught up on a bit of shopping. What did they buy? Clothes they could have bought in Bergisch Gladbach...

ELCHE, SPAIN – Got a headache? Buy a small wax model of a head, and suspend it at the shrine of your favourite saint in the church. Gammy leg? Hang up a wax leg. Breasts too big (or too small)? Add a model of the relevant bits. Each of the chapels in the church here is festooned with a little bouquet of body parts. Certainly a lot cheaper than a visit to the doctor. But just what did the wax butterfly mean?

BARCELONA, SPAIN – I had just finished lecturing Oliver and Janina on the dangers of pickpockets when the train stopped. We trooped on, but someone tugged on my jacket: there was spit on my shoulder... Evelyn pushed me into the train. "They're trying to rob you," she said. Sure enough, the zip on my moneybelt was half-open. Nothing lost fortunately; Evelyn's quick reaction had saved our passports and plane tickets. I spent a sweaty rest of the day with my moneybelt tucked under my shirt and my jacket zipped up. Even Oliver switched his backpack onto his chest while he and Janina... went shopping.

May

BERGISCH GLADBACH – Young German men traditionally decorate a young tree with ribbons for their girlfriends on May Day. The women are supposed to wake to see the colourful tree outside her window. The woods on 30 April are full of youths chopping down trees and loading them onto cars. Oliver and I bought a couple of young birches legally, from the forestry service. At 4:30 the following morning, we fetched the trees from their hideout and garnished them with ribbons. We erected Janina's in her garden, and hung Evelyn's from the balcony of the flat upstairs. Traditionally, only unmarried women are given trees. I hung Evelyn's at a 45° angle, just in case someone thought we weren't actually married. She did get a couple of discreet queries from the neighbours, though.

June

DHAKA, BANGLADESH – Half a dozen tanks line the road to the office. There's a patrol boat on a plinth, and three fighter planes mounted at rakish angles. Faced with mammoth traffic jams while a new flyover is being built, the government has opened a road through a military camp, normally closed to the public. I can only think that the military hardware is meant to impress potential recruits of the wonders of employment in the armed forces.

My office courtyard is filling with hulks of vehicles left over from previous projects. Bangladesh may rank as the most corrupt country on the planet, but no one seems able to sell old cars, so they mount up in the courtyard, rusting and stripped of parts. I counted 38 wrecks in all. Soon there will be no room to park an operative vehicle. Maybe we should put a wreck on a plinth outside the gate to impress potential employees?

BERGISCH GLADBACH – "What? On a Sunday? At midday!" Evelyn was distraught. I had proudly told her that I had mown our lawn. "How long have you lived in Germany?" she wanted to know. "Haven't you heard of the lunchtime rest period?" I protested that the neighbours would hardly object: our hand-mower is very quiet and the lawn is not large. In any case, Sunday lunchtime is when Brits traditionally mow their lawns, and the Germans should be prepared to accept my culture. Then I made matters worse. I admitted I had also mown the neighbour's lawn: the grass was long, and she seemed to have gone away, so I thought I would do her a favour. "But she told me only a couple of days ago that she wanted to let her grass grow!" said Evelyn. I wrote the neighbour a letter apologizing for mowing her lawn, pleading with her not to sue me for disturbing the midday quiet, saying it was unnecessary to hurl abuse at me (my wife had already done so), and assuring her it would never happen again. The neighbour called the next day: she had been delighted to find her lawn freshly cut. Ah, the joy of vindication.

July

HUE, VIETNAM – I hired a bike and clattered over the bridge to the Citadel: the vast imperial palace that dominates one bank of the Perfume River. In search of a guidebook, I followed a sign saying "Guides". The "guide" turned out to be a young woman rather than a colour booklet, but I hired her anyway to show me round. The palace had been occupied by the Viet Cong during the 1968 Tet Offensive, and was bombed by the Americans when they reconquered the city. Some of the main buildings have been rebuilt, complete with golden dragons writhing up giant red pillars. The theatre is a reversal of the western concept: the emperor sat on a stage to watch performances on the hall floor. For a fee, tourists can dress in his finery to have their photos taken. Such impertinence would have led to an unpleasant death if the real emperor were still around.

August

STOKE PRIOR, HEREFORDSHIRE, UK – Never before have so many Mundys assembled in one place. Nineteen children, spouses and grandchildren, plus many friends and neighbours, noshed through mountains of food, drank gallons of booze, and toasted my parents' on their 50th wedding anniversary. The only one missing, my niece Lyndsay, was in the USA. She still appears in the group photos, though – as a blowup photo.

September

CLIFFS OF MOHER, COUNTY CLARE, IRELAND – The paths of backpackers and package holidaymakers intersect in mercifully few locations in this beautiful, empty land. One is this spectacular rocky Atlantic vista. Huge coaches disgorge cargoes of Americans and Bavarians, who head for the loo, then to the cliff edge for a 5-minute gawp, on to the tearoom and souvenir shop for rather longer, and then back to the bus – perhaps with another trip to the loo just to make sure. Along the path to the cliffs, buskers play harps and pan-flutes, and hawkers flog blankets and jewellery. We recognized several from the hostel where we were staying, trying to earn enough from each coachload to pay for the next stage of their own holiday.



October

BOCHUM, GERMANY – Evelyn may have travelled the globe, but she still doesn't know how to get around her own backyard. Despite detailed instructions *and* a map, she got lost on the way to the station in Bochum. She then took what she thought was the train to Düsseldorf – which went instead to Essen, and then returned to Bochum. Three hours to complete a one-hour journey. My advice: when travelling with Evelyn, check which platform you're on, listen to station announcements, check the map, ask passers-by for directions, and trust your own judgement.

November

UTRECHT, NETHERLANDS – Evelyn is getting lots of practice spotting thieves. A youth in a red jacket tried to pick a friend's pocket in front of the cathedral. Evelyn hustled the friend out of the way. Later they saw the same young man, now wearing blue. He had

reversed his jacket, but the telltale red was still showing at the collar. He hurriedly tucked the collar away and scuttled off in search of less observant victims.

DHAKA – The new flyover had just been opened, and the flags and bunting still waved in the breeze. A group of protesters had decided this was an ideal opportunity for a demonstration, so they put a bamboo barrier across the road. A long tailback formed as passengers got out of each vehicle, lifted the pole so their car could pass underneath, and then got back into their car. The car in front of us bumped the bamboo onto the ground, and we drove over it. Up to another barrier at the pavilion where the Prime Minister had opened the bridge. My fellow passenger lifted that barrier over the car, told the demonstrators to take their bamboo home with them, and we drove over the now empty bridge.

Demonstrations and strikes are common here in Bangladesh. There have been three all-day general strikes just in the last month, called by the opposition to protest against the government. During a strike, nothing moves: people fear that opposition thugs will beat them up if they venture out of doors. Government thugs retaliate by breaking up opposition rallies. The latest strike at least took the fasting month of Ramadan into account, though: in deference to the holy month, it ended at 2 pm instead of at 6.

BERGISCH GLADBACH, 18 NOVEMBER – Evelyn's father died today. A wonderful man, the best father-in-law I can imagine. He has left a huge gap in our family.

RAJASTHAN, INDIA– I think I'm allergic to Rajasthan. I came down with suspected malaria, so missed the Pushkar camel fair. I recovered in time to facilitate a conference on camels, then fell ill again on the way back home, and mislaid my passport. I spent a frantic day in Delhi getting a new passport, and arrived at the airport to discover that my flight had been rescheduled and had just left. Things did get better, though: I found my passport in my suitcase, and managed to get home in time for Evelyn's father's funeral.

December

BERGISCH GLADBACH– Oliver has got his driving license and is now polite to us. He has to be – if he wants to borrow the car. Evelyn and I like this state of affairs. We are discouraging him from saving up for his own set of wheels.

A very happy Christmas, Idul Fitri, Diwali, Hanukkah, Tet and New Year.

Paul, Evelyn and Oliver