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A lot has happened in 2007. If you find this letter too long, try reading it in instalments, perhaps as you go to bed at night. It might help you get to sleep.

January

BERGISCH GLADBACH, GERMANY – Evelyn is not the most dedicated *karateka*: she skips training sessions on the most trivial of excuses. Today it was because she had not cut her fingernails: “too dangerous”, she said. Last week it was because I had cooked with garlic. Apparently this makes your opponents fall over when you shout at them. No actual violence necessary. I thought that was the whole point of karate?

February

ADDIS ABABA, ETHIOPIA – The hyenas no longer howl around the outskirts of Addis. They have given way to a building boom. There’s suddenly money here: the new ring road around the city is already too tight, and a rising number of cars now have to weave their way through the goats and plodding donkeys that still wend their way along the streets. The Europeans and Chinese are building roads, which are quickly lined with offices and fast-food restaurants. Is Ethiopia finally breaking out of the grinding poverty it has been stuck in for long?

TEBELLONG, LESOTHO – “I’m Oliver’s mother”, said Mapapali as she greeted Evelyn. “So am I”, said Evelyn. Oliver has been staying in one of Mapapali’s huts in this highland village. No water or electricity –



Taking a break from weeding in Tebellong

but nowhere in Tebellong has such luxuries. Oliver said he had some work for us to do during our visit. “Some work” turned out to be weeding his bean field: several days of backbreaking toil, starting each day at 6 o’clock in the morning. I’m not made out to be a farmer: I think I killed more beans than weeds.

The understatement continued when Oliver took us on a hike around the area. “It’s not far” turned out to be a 7-hour walk up rocky slopes and along precipices. It also meant stunning views of the Drakensberg mountains and the Orange River. And the lack of electricity in Tebellong gave night skies glittering with stars: the Milky Way was so bright that it almost cast a shadow.

During his community service year here, Oliver has been farming in the mornings – growing maize, beans and wheat on a field belonging to two AIDS orphans. The crops looked good despite our weeding efforts, and the children will have a surplus to sell this year. In the afternoons, Oliver has been teaching computer skills to the project staff, and managing lists of the many orphans in the village. If only our own work were so useful!

ADDO, SOUTH AFRICA – “Please don’t drive over the elephant dung”, say signs all over the Addo Elephant Park. Dung beetles are an endangered species here, so visitors are enjoined not to disturb them as they engage in their favourite pastime: rolling up balls of elephant turd. Oliver navigated our hire-car carefully around the enormous piles of droppings on the road. The elephants seem to sympathize: they carefully stepped over the piles too. Perhaps they can read the signs?

Evelyn’s chief interest in the wildlife in South Africa was to spot skin parasites. We had to stop alongside every antelope we saw to inspect it for ticks. Perhaps that’s why she and I both came out with itchy bites on our arms and torsos.

STELLENBOSCH, SOUTH AFRICA – “Do you have springbok?” Oliver’s question was addressed not to a game park warden, but a waitress. He has gone round the country trying to eat all the wildlife he can. Yes, they had springbok: it tastes like venison. Ostrich is like beef, warthog is like pork, crocodile is like chicken, and a kuduburger looks and tastes like Big Mac. No, we don’t know what the penguins at Simon’s Town taste like – they are a protected species, so don’t appear on menus.



Oliver’s two mothers



Oliver’s house in Tebellong. His friend Niko (right) travelled with us



35 m above the forest floor: Storm's River, South Africa

March

COCHABAMBA, BOLIVIA – Coca sweets, coca toothpaste, coca tea... The majority of the Bolivian coca harvest gets converted into cocaine in secret jungle labs and is smuggled out to addicts worldwide. But some ends up in legitimate products. I resolved to take some coca tea back home. The sniffer dogs at German customs did not even whimper. You definitely don't get a high from a cup of coca tea: they say you would need a whole bathtub-full to make a single snort of cocaine.

The local delicacy here is guinea pig. No, I didn't get a chance to sample some (though I ate one in Indonesia many years ago). I can't remember if it tastes more like crocodile or ostrich.

BERGISCH GLADBACH, 31 MARCH – Evelyn's mother, Eva-Maria, died this morning. Stylish and full of humour, she was a wonderful mother, mother-in-law and grandmother. We miss her.

April

MÜLLENBERG, KÜRTEEN, GERMANY – After languishing in rented accommodation for many years, Evelyn and I have finally joined the debt-encumbered majority. We've bought – or rather, the bank is buying on our behalf – a house just a stone's throw (well, make that several stones) from Bergisch Gladbach. Set in the idyllic countryside and surrounded on three sides by a scenic lake (which you can't get close to because it's fenced off), this property is close enough to the airport for me to make quick getaways, and close enough to Evelyn's karate club to keep her in fighting trim. Plus, we know how to get through the fence around the lake...

Our new address and phone numbers are in the letterhead.

May

BRIMSTONE HILL, ST KITTS – "I'm going to say that there are five Kittitians on board", said the bus driver as we rolled up to the gate of this massive hilltop fortress. The entry ticket for locals was significantly cheaper than for visitors. "No, make it six!" said one of our course participants. "No, seven!" said another. In fact there were only two people who could genuinely claim to be locals, but the ticket seller did not ask to see anyone's passport.

The British and their black slaves built Brimstone Hill, the "Gibraltar of the Caribbean" as a bastion against the French, Spanish, and anyone else who might want to wrest the island from British control. Strange to think: in the mid-1700s, the tiny, mountainous but sugar-producing islands of St Kitts and Nevis were worth more than all 13 North American colonies combined.

June

TEHRAN, IRAN – I think the number of nose-jobs in Iran is declining. Last time I was here, I counted 17 young women with the telltale sticking plaster across the bridge of their noses. This time I've only

seen 5 such plasters – 2 of them stuck on male faces. Why the decline? Iran's economic slump, reducing demand for luxury items such as straighter noses? The recent crackdown on foreign influences (women can get beaten up for showing too much hair under their headscarves)? Or perhaps Tehran's surgeons have been too successful, and have exhausted the supply of oversized noses that need cosmetic surgery?

So I tried to guess who has had a nose-job in the past. The metro is full of suspiciously straight or pointed noses. Not that it is easy to ogle women on the train: most are confined to the front and back carriages, which are "women only". These carriages are furthest from the platform exits, so if you find yourself jostled by black-clad women coming out of the station, it's too late to catch the train: it will have departed long ago.

SARI, IRAN – It was not the holiday season yet, so the lines of tall wooden poles that run down the beach into the Caspian Sea were bare. In season, they are draped with cloth to separate the men's and women's sections of the beach. Not that sunbathing is terribly popular in Iran: people prefer to go to Dubai, Lebanon or Europe, where they can relax, well away from the attentions of the religious police.

STOKE PRIOR, HEREFORDSHIRE, UK – My father's 80th birthday, and all the Mundys except Oliver (still in Lesotho) had gathered to celebrate. My cousin's husband started chatting to one of my parents' neighbours, and discovered that she had babysat him as a child. Small, small world.

July

NAIROBI, KENYA – Taxi drivers here are always on the lookout for passengers: they always give me their business cards and mobile phone numbers, and ask if they can pick me up the next day. Sadly for them, I already have a regular taxi driver: I text him before I arrive in the country, and he picks me up from the airport, then waits for me at my hotel every morning to take me to work.

Much more reliable than *matatus*, the crowded minibuses that drive at breakneck speed along the roads, skip traffic jams by bumping along the potholed hard shoulder, and swerve across three lanes of traffic to pick up a potential passenger.

COLOGNE AIRPORT, GERMANY – I didn't want to come home – at least, not today. But KLM insisted: they refused to let me get a flight from Amsterdam to Göteborg because I had already booked one to Cologne. "Sorry, your ticket is non-reroutable", said the travel agent. So I had to fly from Amsterdam to Cologne, then back to Amsterdam again before I could go to Göteborg. Where KLM managed to lose my luggage. They delivered it just in time for me to change clothes and fly back to Cologne.

GÖTEBORG, SWEDEN – Need to catch a bus? Then I can recommend the bus station in Göteborg. It puts the rainy, windswept, litter-strewn wastelands that pass for bus stations in the rest of Europe to shame. Inside the air-conditioned building are a shopping mall and lounge with comfortable seats. A door glides open when the bus is ready for boarding, and passengers embark smoothly – no pushing or elbowing here, please – this *is* Sweden, after all.

MÜLLENBERG – What colour should the bathroom tiles be? How about the ceiling? Where should this new door go? Questions that everyone renovating a house must answer. In our case, the answers came not from me, but from the builder: Evelyn seemed to trust his judgement and sense of style more readily than mine. I wonder why?

Let me introduce Jane. She is slim and trendy, has a sexy voice, and responds to gentle touches. She accepts others' opinions, and does not harp on about my mistakes for weeks afterwards. If I take a corner too fast while driving, she lets me know discretely – unlike Evelyn, who grips the car door handle until her knuckles turn white.

In fact, Jane has only two faults: she always tries to guide me through a locked gate across the road near our house. And she's not human. "Jane" is the name of the voice of our new satellite navigation system.

So when Jane stopped talking, it was a major loss. I started having to consult maps and ask directions again. I shipped her off for repair. She came back with a new chip installed. She still doesn't know the way



Stuff, stuff, stuff? No – the boxes contain nothing but holy literature

home, but I don't mind: somehow I like driving past that locked gate and goading her into gentle insistence: "Turn around when possible."

August

BERGISCH GLADBACH – "You've got a big pile of crap here", said the head of the removal team. Our belongings are admittedly humble, but "crap"? Then I realized he was referring not to the belongings, but the boxes we had packed them in. The boxes were made of thin cardboard that tore easily, he explained, and they came apart when they were slid along the lorry floor. "You should have used our boxes", he said. "They will last a thousand moves." I decided not to explain that I had no desire to move 1000 times – once was more than enough. I merely wished his team luck: we had over 180 boxes waiting to be moved.

MÜLLENBERG – "Stuff, stuff, stuff!" wailed Evelyn, "I don't want so much stuff!" We were unpacking our mountain of flimsy cardboard boxes. I tried to sound helpful. "Why don't you throw something away?" I suggested, handing her a printed speech by Hans-Dietrich Genscher, then Minister of the Interior, to the German parliament in 1972. "No, that's a book!" she said. "They're holy!"

So every inch of wall space in our new house is lined with shelves to hold this sacred literature. At least it acts as good insulation, and maybe I can add a volume or two to the fire as the weather gets colder.

FRANKFURT AIRPORT, GERMANY – Waiting at Arrivals for Oliver to land after finishing his year in Lesotho, Evelyn peered past the tall young woman in the funny hat. Then the young woman greeted her – and Evelyn realized it was Oliver with long hair. I then arrived and failed to recognize him too – though I blame the funny hat rather than his hair.

Oliver's first impressions of Germany? "It's so green!" compared to the brown hills of Lesotho. And when we arrived in Müllenberg: "you live out in the sticks!" Although we *do* have water and electricity...

September

NAIROBI, KENYA – The workshop participants were discussing agricultural trading, so visited a livestock market to see how it worked. On their return, they reported that a river of blood from slaughtered animals had flowed through the market, and vultures had pecked at bits of flesh. Few of the participants wanted their dinner that evening.

INTERLAKEN, SWITZERLAND – Evelyn's colleagues had brought an Indian musician to accompany the conference delegation from Rajasthan. The musician proved a hit: he played his *ravanhatta* instrument during the conference, on the boat on the lake, and at the parallel exhibition. And at the airport: a fellow-passenger was so



No wonder we didn't recognize Oliver in that traditional Basotho hat

enamoured that he offered to buy his *ravanhatta*. The musician was pleased to sell it, at a tidy profit: he had another two with him.

BERGISCH GLADBACH – We spent many days clearing out Evelyn's late parents' house. Oliver discovered he had inherited his grandfather's feet, so he chose five stylish pairs of shoes as we emptied the wardrobe. Wishing to look smart for a presentation he gave at his old school, he chose the best pair. Halfway through his presentation, a hole appeared in one of the shoes: the sole began to separate from the upper. By the end of the talk, one shoe had disintegrated completely, and the other was flapping open at the front.

What caused them to disintegrate?, we wanted to know. Was the aged rubber really perished, or were his sweaty feet partly responsible? When Oliver wants to look smart now, he takes all four remaining pairs with him, plus a pair of sports shoes as backup.

MÜLLENBERG – The man who originally built our house bore the nickname "Concrete Erich". An apt moniker – the walls are solid: drilling holes with my little power drill to hang a cupboard was proving hard work. Our next-door neighbour thought so too: he knocked on our door to say so. I realized only then how late it was: 10 pm: no time in silence-loving Germany to be drilling holes in a dividing wall. "No problem", he said: "you might want to try using this", handing me a hammer drill. I quickly discovered the superiority of this piece of equipment: even Concrete Erich's handiwork gave way in seconds.

The neighbour's generosity was not limited to drills. He also lent us a machine to shred garden waste. And after I broke both our lawnmowers trying to cut a swathe through the long grass in the back garden, he offered his mower too. I succeeded in doubling the width of the swathe before it too died – and then the starter cord snapped as I attempted to restart it. Three dead mowers in a single afternoon... I retired defeated indoors to drill some more holes.

October

MARBURG, GERMANY – Oliver is studying geography at the university here. He has rented a room in a high-rise in the grotty end of town. He has a panoramic view of the castle and mediaeval town centre, "and the people who live there have a view of our tower block".

MÜLLENBERG – Oliver's plans for a football field in our garden conflicted somewhat with Evelyn's vision of a natural biotope, which in this part of the world means a tangle of brambles and stinging nettles. After weeks of shuttle diplomacy – how about not chopping down *all* the trees? do we really need to keep the giant hogweed? – I managed to broker a compromise: the football field would go on the right side of the garden, while the biotope would occupy the left.

Nine young men can get a lot done in an afternoon if there's the prospect of a beer and barbecue afterwards. Instead of 21st birthday presents, Oliver asked his friends to help him prepare the football field. We supplied the equipment: three mowers (yes, all miraculously repaired), a chainsaw, hedge trimmers, a strimmer, and assorted axes, saws, rakes, shovels and hammers. By dusk our garden was beginning



Oliver's girlfriend Julia's turn to wear a Basotho hat

to look a little more like a football field than a jungle. I plan to invite all my friends round to celebrate my birthday in a similar way.

COLOGNE, GERMANY – “So how much codswallop did you tell them?” Evelyn wanted to know. I had just finished a radio interview for the BBC – all about me, me, me. The interviewer wanted to know why I got interested in development work, why I went abroad, and what changes I had seen in the world over the last 50 years.

Yes, the big Five-Oh. The BBC radio programme *Today* was first broadcast on 28 October 1957. So was I. The BBC arranged a joint celebration: they asked me, along with a bunch of other people born on the same day, to contribute blogs about their lives. They called it the “Today Generation”. Not the “Yesterday Generation”, mind you, or even the “Several Years Past Due Date Generation”. Thanks a bunch to the Beeb for reminding me how old I am. You can check my blog at www.mamud.com (click on BBC Today Generation). Not that the Beeb thought much of it: they ignored all my philosophizing, and broadcast a whole 30 seconds of me talking about air travel.

I can tell I'm getting older. It used to be that pretty girls would ask me if I were married. Now they ask me whether my son is married.

ROME, ITALY – A tale from East Africa: a researcher – a molecular biologist – spent years developing a quick test for East Coast Fever, a disease afflicting cattle in Kenya. His test used the animals' urine, instead of the slower, conventional method which required a blood sample. To check its validity, he asked a pastoralist to split his herd into two, and tested each animal in the two groups. To his surprise, all the animals in one group tested positive for the disease, while all the other group were healthy. Clearly, the owner could tell which animals had the disease, and had divided them accordingly. But how? “Quite simple,” said the pastoralist: “their urine smells different.”

MÜLLENBERG – No trips to tourist sites for my parents, or coasting through the glorious autumnal hills around Müllenberg. Instead it was successive trips to a do-it-yourself shop, a builders' merchant and a furniture store. They even made some purchases to take home: two



Müllenberg welcomes you: just don't trust Jane to get you here

toilet brushes. “Can't find this sort anywhere in England”, said my mother. How about a marketing agency for loo-brush-deprived Brits?

November

NAIROBI, KENYA – The Mungiki mafia have been trying to extort money from my Kenyan friend. He has received a series of threatening phone calls: “we know where you live, we know where you work.” “No point in going to the police”, he said: “they're in cahoots with the extortionists.” A private deal was the only way out: he contacted a friend who knew someone high up in the gang. The gang leader put out the word: “This man is my brother: lay off him.” The phone calls have stopped. But how many victims with fewer contacts succumb and pay up?

BANGKOK, THAILAND – How things in Thailand have changed. Evelyn was keen to see where she stayed while studying here 30 years ago. The hostel was still there, but the busy road in front was now a motorway flyover, and a skyscraper stood in the once-spacious garden.

AMERSFOORT, NETHERLANDS – The African men in Evelyn's meeting were proud that they had redressed the gender balance: they were carrying the heaviest bags. “But it's always like that in Europe”, said Evelyn. “The men are supposed to do the carrying.” The men were stunned: in Africa, the women get to do all the heavy lifting. I wonder if the men will fetch wood and haul water when they go back home?

MÜLLENBERG – We are considering putting up warning signs around the house to alert visitors of the hazards it contains. The first time my mother entered our living room, she tripped over the step and bruised her legs. (Why is there a step in the living room? I don't know: ask Concrete Erich.) And the chimney sweep made me sign a declaration stating I was aware of the risks of turning on the kitchen fan while the living room fire is alight. (The fan might suck carbon monoxide down the chimney and poison us all.) At least if we are asphyxiated my mother won't be able to sue us for her medical expenses.

December

MÜLLENBERG – Our house has a wood stove for heating, but Evelyn will not let me burn any of the scrap wood we have accumulated during the last few months' renovations. “It releases gases and clogs the chimney with soot”, she says. So when she said she was going for a walk, I seized the opportunity to load some scrap onto the fire. She reappeared five minutes later, hot and out of breath: from the top of the hill, she had spotted white smoke against the night sky and was afraid that the house was burning down. Her conclusion: she cannot trust me. My conclusion: I cannot do anything without her finding out.

A very happy Diwali, Christmas, Hanukkah, New Year, Tabaski, Eid Ghorban, Idul Adha, Tet and Norooz. Let us know if you want a football field in your garden, and I'll get Oliver and his friends onto it. And if you have a Jane with you when you come to visit, ignore her when she tells you to drive through the locked gate.

Paul, Evelyn and Oliver