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GREETINGS! Read on to learn about how to grow mushrooms in your kitchen, how get the Catholic Church to pay for a trip to a lap dancing club, how to hunt hippos, how to make an Italian policeman reach for his gun, and why I want to buy a tanga.

January

MÜLLENBERG, GERMANY – “Can’t you do that somewhere else, you arseholes?” We had gathered in the field opposite our house at midnight to welcome in the New Year with a few fireworks – some



Not even Donald Rumsfeld had ones like these

impressive-looking rockets that we dubbed the “Rumsfeld collection” after the former US Defense Secretary. Our next-door-neighbour’s dog was indeed impressed: at the first explosion she disappeared. And the third rocket attracted the above cheery greeting from the village grouch – a man not known for his civility, nor for his seasonal good cheer. The dog reappeared the following morning. We hope it will take longer for Mr Grouch to resurface.

Maybe I should have mentioned the mushroom in last year’s letter, but it didn’t then seem important enough. But when Evelyn found a second mushroom growing in the same place – at the base of the wall in the kitchen – she decided to investigate. She found that the wall behind a row of cupboards was damp and mouldy. We called in the specialists, who dug a hole in the floor and found the kitchen was sitting on a pool of water. After briefly considering diversifying into fisheries, we turned to the insurance man, the leak detector, the plumber, the drying specialist and the builder. Now our pipes no longer leak, the floor has been retiled, and the walls are repainted. And we’re back to visiting the supermarket if we want to make mushroom ragout.

ROME, ITALY – “Night Club 1001 Lap Dance”, says Evelyn’s receipt. She tried to convince me that it was for a taxi ride: the taxi firm used its receipts to advertise other establishments, she claimed. I finally believed her when she pointed out that €7.00 is a bit low for an adult entertainment bill. But I wonder whether she will convince the Catholic donor agency that this was a legitimate expense?

February

KIMANA, KENYA – There’s a three-way fight here between farmers, the pastoralist Maasai, and elephants. The problem is water: the area is dry, except where springs, fed by snows on nearby Kilimanjaro, gush from the ground and feed swamplands that the Maasai use for grazing. But many of the Maasai find that renting the land out to farmers more profitable than using it for livestock. The farmers divert the water to irrigate fields of melons. Elephants migrating between the nearby Amboseli and Tsavo national parks end up in the fields – and elephants love melons.

The solution? Make it economically attractive for the Maasai to keep the land in its natural state. That means leasing land as wildlife sanctuaries, developing ecotourism as an alternative source of income, and mitigating conflicts when they arise. Oliver, Julia



Hot and hatless after climbing Mount Longonot

and I visited a project here that is building walls around the springs to keep both elephants and livestock out. That keeps the water clean for drinking and irrigation, and leaves enough to feed the nearby swamp and keep the elephants happy.

NAIROBI, KENYA – “Looks like he swerved and kissed the fence,” said my taxi-driver. A bus was in the ditch, heading the wrong way down the dual carriageway. The mother of all jams formed: nine lanes of traffic on one direction, squeezing oncoming lorries and buses into a single lane on the bumpy hard shoulder. Ever-resourceful, the public minibus conductors got out and started directing vehicles. “They’re good at causing traffic problems, but they’re good at solving them too,” said my driver.

Indeed: earlier in the week we had seen a minibus making its way across the flower bed in the middle of one of Nairobi’s roundabouts. The passengers had to shovel earth into the storm drain on the other side so it could get back onto the road.

MOUNT LONGONOT, KENYA – I hadn’t realized how windy it would be at the top of this mountain – a volcanic crater in the Rift Valley. A gust picked off my hat and blew it over the rim into the crater. I peered down the cliff after it – and saw it nestled next to two other hats. Obviously others had fallen victim to the same gust. I borrowed Evelyn’s jumper to wrap around my head to shield me from sunburn. A good thing she normally wears so many layers of clothing.

March

RUSHERE, UGANDA – A herd of Ankole cattle is a fearsome sight: the animals have very large, white horns, up to 1.8 m long, that act as a cooling system in the hot climate. They are a hardy breed that produces a lot of milk. Despite this, the local Bahima herders are replacing them with more prestigious European breeds. But when the herders document the Ankole’s characteristics, they begin to realize the value of the breed. The work of Evelyn’s group was eased by the presence of a German female student, who



Ankole cattle: milk with care

the herders said looked just like their mythical ancestor. More research is needed on how a fair-skinned brunette could be an ancestor of the dark-skinned Bahima.

KABERAMAIDO, UGANDA – Oliver and Julia spent their Easter vacation working with a project in northern Uganda. The project was helping refugees from the murderous Lord’s Resistance Army. Oliver and Julia designed a questionnaire to evaluate 40 “farmers’ field schools” where people could improve their farming skills. One of their Ugandan colleagues had been kidnapped three times by the LRA to be used as a porter and child-soldier; he had managed to escape each time: once when he was ordered to chase a chicken for lunch, and kept on running.

BRUGES, BELGIUM – When my parents arrived in this picturesque city on a day trip, Evelyn and I were lying in wait for them: we had found out which coach company they were travelling with and got the driver to tell us when they would arrive. The surprise was total – it took several minutes for my father to pick his jaw up off the floor. A day trip does not leave much time to see the sights if the coach is to get back to the UK in time for tea, so we gulped down a plate of mussels in the town square (well OK, my father had chicken and chips), then took my parents back to their coach. Total time in Bruges: 2 hours.

LORELEY, GERMANY – If you ever need a romantic spot for your car radiator to boil over, then copy Evelyn and choose the Rhine gorge, just opposite the Loreley. Steeped in legend and for some reason a magnet for Japanese tourists, the Loreley is a big rock overlooking the narrowest stretch of the Rhine. It is said that a beautiful maiden there lured boatmen to their deaths on the rocks below. Looks like she has given up on boats and is now preying on car engine-cooling systems.

April

AMSTERDAM, NETHERLANDS – The *Visitor’s Guide to Amsterdam* is a slim volume with information on museums and restaurants, and 24 pages of advertisements for “escort services” – for visitors who want charming company during their stay in the Dutch capital. We are considering starting an editing service based in Müllenberg. I wonder if combining it with an escort service would help attract clients?

KAMPALA, UGANDA – Oliver ended up in hospital in Kampala with malaria. In the next bed was the Somali Minister of Defence, who had lead poisoning: he was recovering from bullet wounds. Oliver was concerned that the insurgents would attack again, and that the minister’s bodyguards would use him as a shield. The minister gave Oliver and Julia an ice cream. Not many students can boast that a minister of state has bought them dessert, can they?



If Evelyn offers you this (*Matricaria recutita*, or chamomile)...



...make sure it’s not this (*Anthemis arvensis*)

MÜLLENBERG – “I’m out of condition!” complained Evelyn, hanging limply from the branch of our cherry tree. “I can’t pull myself up any more. You try it.” I grabbed the blossom-laden branch above my head, but as I pulled my chin level with it, it cracked, and both branch and I hit the ground. The tree now looks rather lopsided. I think Evelyn needs more exercise. She thinks I should lose weight.

Her approach for helping me do so involves feeding me with

such delicacies as stinging nettles, dandelions and hogweed from our garden. She has shelves of books explaining how to cook these and other weeds, including several that warn about those that are poisonous. If you don’t get this letter this year, you’ll know she has fed me with deadly *Anthemis arvensis* instead of nutritious look-alike *Matricaria recutita*. What you won’t know is whether she did so deliberately.

MÜLLENBERG – As I write this, Evelyn is daubing my left knee with a thick layer of sour milk curd (40% fat, brand name “Good and Cheap”). She is now adding a layer of flattened cabbage leaves, and three gel-filled cooler bags, fresh from the freezer, followed by a couple of towels, all held in place by an empty moneybelt.

I had hoped that this procedure, recommended by my doctor to reduce the swelling on my newly operated left knee, would be a one-off. But Evelyn says it’s too much fun to do just once. She likes to hear my reaction as she ladles cold curd into the hollow behind my knee.

I found a webpage that says you can use the same treatment on horses. But there you have to make sure the horse does not eat the cabbage. Not a problem for me: I can’t nibble at my knee even at the best of times, let alone when it’s stiff after an operation and wrapped up in several layers of organic produce and freezer bags.



Best not to approach a hungry horse with a knee like this

May

BREGENZ, AUSTRIA – We were a few weeks too early for the Verdi opera *Aida*, to be performed on a stage built over the waters of Lake Constance. But we did see a Viking longboat being lowered into position, over a couple of giant blue feet emblazoned with gold stars. Quite what a Viking ship (and a pair of giant feet, for that matter) have to do with Verdi’s story of an Ethiopian princess enslaved by ancient Egyptians, I don’t know.



Aida arriving by air

June

MÜLLENBERG – As I heaved on the fence-post in our garden, it came out of the earth suddenly, hitting me on the head and sending my glasses off on an unknown trajectory into the long grass. I couldn’t find them by groping, Evelyn was away, and I couldn’t locate my spare glasses either – so I had to ask the neighbour for help. He found the glasses several metres away, lodged in a stinging nettle. I may be getting a reputation as being competence-challenged, but at least I make up for it in entertainment value.

QUARR ABBEY, RYDE, ISLE OF WIGHT, UK – My friend Alan has multiple sclerosis, a disease that attacks the central nervous system and makes it impossible to walk. He’s now confined to a wheelchair and is having his house rebuilt so he can use the bathroom and get in through the door. Friends have erected wooden railings on either side of his garden path so he can lever his way up to a shady nook under a tree. Despite this illness, Alan and his wife Judy are incredibly cheerful: they took us to visit this placid



Morfa Isaf, Wales

Benedictine abbey hidden in the folds of the Isle of Wight countryside. Forced to move slowly and plan carefully, they seem to extract more enjoyment from life than those of us who rush past in a hurry.

LLANTHONY, GWENT, UK – The border between England and Wales is rarely more clear-cut than on the last ridge of the Black Mountains. To the east lies England: neat, green fields,

bounded by hedgerows, stretch away into the distance. To the west is Wales: wild and wet, with stone walls pretending to separate one field of heather and brown bracken from the next. Down in the Vale of Ewyas, on the Welsh side, stand the ruins of Llanthony Priory. Well worth a visit: it's the only Augustinian monastery I know with a pub in the basement.

July

STOKE PRIOR, HEREFORDSHIRE, UK – The biggest gathering of Mundys ever – I counted 22 of us, and at least three more were missing. Feeding this horde is a major undertaking, which my mother abjured for the first time in the best part of a century. We trooped into a local hotel instead, and promptly cleared the larder of everything edible. My mother did insist on providing us all with tea and cakes afterwards, though – a logistical challenge in itself.

MÜLLENBERG – “Congratulations! We are pleased to inform you that you have been awarded a place in the...” Yet another spam phone call... I hung up. Seconds later, the phone rang again: Oliver had been reading out a letter of acceptance from his hall of residence in Paris. He's going to spend the next year studying at the Sorbonne. Maybe by then the students there will have ended their semester-long strike against President Sarkozy's university reforms.

DÜSSELDORF, GERMANY – Two women turned up to the demonstration against vote-rigging and repression in Iran and unfurled large Iranian flags bearing the Shah's golden lion in the middle. The other demonstrators objected: despite their common dislike of the mullahs, there is little love lost between the monarchists and the republican opposition. A scuffle broke out, and the police stepped in to break it up. Lucky this was Germany: in Tehran, demonstrations are broken up by the *Basij*, club-wielding thugs on motorbikes. Sad to say, the turnout in Düsseldorf – perhaps 300 people – is not going to give the mullahs any sleepless nights.



On top of Twmpa, a mountain in south Wales

August

MÜLLENBERG – All of our male neighbours seem to do such manly things. One gets up at 5 a.m. each morning to herd his sheep before going off to his job making traffic lights. Another mixes cement, manhandles heavy joists and wields impressive-sounding power tools as he builds a carport. A third, tanned and wearing nothing but a string tanga, sharpened our scythe with a lathe in his garage, sending showers of sparks towards his red vintage sports car. Evelyn was impressed. I'm beginning to feel inadequate. If I touch a drill or mower, its motor burns out. As soon as I pick up a hammer, Evelyn complains about the noise. And if I climb more than two rungs up a ladder, she breaks down in hysterics. I'm considering secretly taking courses in home maintenance and bodybuilding. After that I'll consider going shopping for a tanga. The sports car may have to wait.

MÜLLENBERG – Our kitchen looked like a scene from a chainsaw massacre movie. I was pressing elderberries in a cloth to make jelly, and squeezed too hard: the cloth split, splattering purple juice everywhere. Elderberry juice causes indelible stains, impossible to remove completely. If I ever murder someone, I'll use *Anthemis arvensis*: it's much easier to clean up than after a session with a chainsaw.

September

RYDE, ISLE OF WIGHT, UK – Alan used the first get-together of Egypt volunteers in 30 years to ask us to move a bush in his front garden. The bush was large, and the garden soil appeared to consist largely of a rusty bed frame. We transplanted the bush into an equally stony hole in the back garden, watered it copiously, then fled for the mainland before it died.

MARALAL, KENYA – “Has anyone ever been here before to ask you about your animals?” Evelyn was interviewing a woman Samburu herder. “Yes!” “Who?” asked Evelyn. “You!” said the herder.

In sociological jargon, I think this is called “respondent fatigue”. In medical jargon, it's called “age-associated memory impairment”.

October

LAKE NAIVASHA, KENYA – The large, rounded shape loomed towards me in the darkness. Yes, a hippo had come out of the lake and was grazing on the hotel lawn. Hippos are reputed to be more dangerous than crocodiles, so I kept my distance. A security guard on his rounds stopped for a chat. “It will mess up the lawn”, he said. “We've got to chase it away.” I followed him, a careful pace or two behind, trying to work out which tree would be easiest to climb if the hippo did not cooperate. But it decided it was no match for us, and ambled back into the bush.

Crescent Island in Lake Naivasha is no longer an island: it has linked up to the shore at both ends, splitting the lake in two. The culprit is falling lake levels, caused by lower-than-usual rain and water pumped out of the lake by farms growing flowers and vegetables destined for the European market. A typical development quandary: should Kenya limit irrigation in order to conserve the environment, thereby earning less from exports? What alternatives are there for its rapidly growing population to earn a living? And who benefits anyway from the capital-intensive exports?

One thing is sure: now the island is no longer an island, carnivores will soon be able to get there to prey on the wildebeest and zebra that have grazed unmolested. If they had a vote, they presumably would choose fewer vegetables and more water.

FUNCHAL, MADEIRA, PORTUGAL – Not much of a holiday with my parents, unfortunately: the weather was miserable, and my father was ill and confined to a wheelchair much of the time. My mother took him to the hospital for emergency treatment, and I flew back to the UK with them to make sure they got home. I'm delighted to



Junks in Ha Long Bay

say that he has since recovered and is once more in holidaying mode: a week in Falmouth later in the year.

AVENTINE HILL, ROME, ITALY – There’s always a police car with a couple of *carabinieri* in front of the church of Santa Maria. A doorway in the square, or more precisely, a keyhole in the doorway, attracts a steady stream of visitors who squint through it at an exquisite view of the dome of St Peter’s in the Vatican, shimmering in the distance.

Evelyn made the mistake of walking between the police car and the church wall. The *carabinieri*, suspicious of her oversized handbag, piled out of the car to point their guns at her. She professed her innocence: her handbag indeed contains a remarkably wide variety of items, but a bomb is not among them. Lesson: when going to stare at the Pope, carry a minimum of baggage, and keep away from the wall.

November

HA LONG BAY, VIETNAM – All the tourist boats seem to leave the crowded harbour at the same time in the morning. The crew push against the neighbouring boats to open up space to move. The air is full of blue diesel fumes as the two-storey wooden boats jostle for position. They head out across the bay in a seemingly endless procession, like some oriental Spanish Armada going to invade the jagged limestone islands that dot the bay. One small island contains a massive cave that seems bigger than the island itself. We stop again at a house-raft where we buy crabs, prawns and fish, kept in alive in plastic laundry baskets bobbing in the sea. An unfortunate fish gets dumped on the deck of the raft and receives a swift blow to the head. The prawns land in plastic bags, from where they are transferred directly to our boat’s wok. All possible thoughts of sympathy for our fellow creatures are banished as we feast on seafood while we cruise among the jagged islets.

PARIS, FRANCE – Oliver met Evelyn as she got off the train. “I’m hungry”, he said. “Buy me something to eat.” He took her straight to that bastion of haute cuisine, McDonald’s. Oliver is picking up Parisian French, while his girlfriend Julia is studying in Quebec and learning the patois there. We are afraid they will not be able to communicate when they see each other again.

Oliver has been elected treasurer of his hall of residence’s student committee. His duties appear to consist of arranging parties and ignoring instructions to keep noise levels down. When we ask him how his studies are going, he gets strangely evasive. Maybe he thinks his party business will be profitable enough to support us in our old age?

December

MÜLLENBERG – I normally like small, furry creatures. I didn’t even mind when a mole set up residence under our lawn: after all, moles aerate the soil and,



There are six houses in Mullenberg. This one isn’t ours



Thank goodness for snow – it hides the molehills

who knows, maybe they eat slugs. But this initial mole has invited its friends and relatives to join it: there is now a sizeable range of molehills on the lawn, and one has appeared in the middle of the terrace, which is paved with concrete slabs. We imagine raucous underground mole parties to celebrate the construction of each new molehill. I fear the family is burrowing under the house as I write this, and we’ll wake up to find a pile of earth in the living room.

The postman suggested trying to deafen the moles by putting a loudspeaker over a tunnel and playing loud music. Hmm... Oliver is in Paris at the moment, so won’t need his stereo for a while...

PARIS – Julia arrived from Quebec on a visit, and Oliver, ever thrifty, hoped to avoid paying the €5-a-night fee for having a guest in his room. But as they arrived with her luggage, they encountered the administrator outside his door – with a camera team. The journalists were shooting a film about the residents, and wanted Oliver and Julia to star in it. So much for parsimony: there is now video evidence that Julia was staying, and Oliver’s wallet is one guest-fee lighter.

NGOROGORO, TANZANIA – When she was younger, Evelyn always wanted to marry Michael Grzimek, a German conservationist who helped establish the Serengeti national park. She was distraught when she learned of his death: the plane he was piloting had collided with a vulture and had crashed. Evelyn visited his grave, on the rim of the Ngorongoro crater, and discovered he had died when she was four. Alas for youthful dreams!

KILIMANJARO AIRPORT, TANZANIA – The plane back to Nairobi was a 13-seater, and the previous flight had been bumpy, so Evelyn asked the pilot for an airsickness bag. Takeoff was delayed by this request: there were no bags on board, so they had to fetch some from the terminal. Fortunately she did not need to use them, and I am now proud owner of some mint-condition Air Fly540 bags.

A very happy Diwali, Christmas, Hanukkah, New Year, Tabaski, Eid Ghorban, Idul Adha, Têt and Norooz. Let us know if you find mushrooms in your kitchen, or if you’d like Evelyn to tie a cabbage around your knee. If you don’t hear from us next year, you’ll know that we’ve been feasting on poisonous weeds. Either that, or the moles have got us.

Paul, Evelyn and Oliver