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The BBC doesn't approve of Christmas newsletters like this one. But if we didn't send it to you, you would never know what lions do on a Sunday afternoon, what to do if your monarch kicks the bucket, why it's good to be a male, or how to save on your botox injections. If you agree with the Beeb, visit www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-20810452. If you want news of our year's mishaps and misdeeds, read on.

January

MT ELGON, UGANDA – Oliver and Julia have finally got engaged! She proposed to him on the top of this mountain in Uganda (easy to remember: 4321 metres). He said yes despite his altitude sickness. He had asked her twice already but she put him off, so he waited for her to pop the question. Wise man: always a bad idea to rush a woman into making a decision.

KAREN, NAIROBI, KENYA – “Did you kiss Meryl Streep's boots?” Evelyn wanted to know. No, and I didn't kiss Robert Redford's trousers either. Both were on display at the Karen Blixen museum, the home of the Danish author featured in the 1985 Oscar-winning film *Out of Africa*. Sadly, the guide forbade me from even touching either item of apparel.

I haven't seen the film, but I understand it ends with the house burning down. A figment of the director's imagination, I'm happy to say: no evidence of any fire in the museum.

February

MÜLLENBERG, GERMANY – A letter from the German tax authorities. Not the hefty bill we had expected, but a reimbursement for tax we had overpaid back in 2009. They even paid us interest: 6.5% a year. That's far more than you can get from anything but the riskiest investment nowadays. In fact, it's the best investment we could have made. I hope they overcharge us again this year.

March

KÜRTEEN, GERMANY – Evelyn has joined the guitar course I have been taking. Even though she hadn't touched a guitar for 30 years, she's a lot better than me. I think natural talent may have something to do with it.

The children performing in our first concert were most impressive as they strummed through their solo numbers. Then it was our turn: a dozen adults headed for the stage. Evelyn and I were not fast enough to grab chairs in the second row, so were condemned to sit in front, exposed to the merciless gaze of the



Give Meikel and Yukiyo enough wine, and they will sit through anything



Japanese garden, Polish trees, Australian hat. “And a British beer belly”, says Evelyn

audience. We entertained them to a rousing sing-along of the Smurf song and Yellow Submarine. We had prepared an extra song in case it was demanded at the end – but alas, there was not a single call for an encore. I wonder why?

BECHEN, GERMANY – “The workers are the females. The drones are the guys: they are a waste of time, get infested by mites, and do no work at all”, said the instructor on our beekeeping course. “Typical men.” Each session, she subjects the men on the course to a barrage of sexist jokes. My theory? The drones do start out trying to do something useful: a little wax-polishing here and pollen-dusting there. But every time they lift an antenna they get such a barrage of criticism from the thousands of females that they lose interest. So they give up and wait to be pampered. A useful strategy, eh, gents?

April

MÜLLENBERG – “I'm getting fat”, said Evelyn, bringing my morning coffee into the bedroom and heaving all of her 51 kg bulk into bed beside me. She must be: the bed collapsed as she said it. Nothing to do with her chocolate consumption, of course.

WIGMORE CASTLE, HEREFORDSHIRE, UK – “When conserving the site, English Heritage deliberately retained its wildness” said the sign. I translate: “We don't have enough money to restore this castle, and we don't think we can charge enough to pay for its upkeep.”

A pity, in a way, as the castle was once one of the most important in England, holding sway over a large part of the Welsh Marches. But it does mean that the ruin is not overrun with tourists: we were the only visitors. Beautiful views over the Marches it once dominated. Get there before English Heritage change their minds.

May

MÜLLENBERG – “Is that a tick?” My friend Dave pointed to a tiny black mark on his leg as we walked through the long grass by the lakeshore. Too early in the year for ticks, I opined, and didn't bother to check. But indeed it was – and a few days later, Dave found an inflamed ring around the bite: a tell-tale sign of borreliosis – a disease that causes stiffness and lethargy. Fortunately it is treatable if caught soon enough.

Lesson: if we take you on a walk around the lake, pay no attention to me: be sure to check yourself for bites afterwards.

MÜLLENBERG – Just ordered a couple of hives, smoker, gloves and veils. We'll get a swarm of bees when we have set up the infrastructure in the garden. How many jars of honey shall we put you down for?

We have to think of the soon-to-arrive days when we can no longer bend down to tend a ground-level bed of veggies. So we have built a raised bed and shed behind the garage. Why is it that 90% of such work consists of shovelling earth and gravel from one place to another? We've sown the vegetable seeds and now wait patiently for them to germinate. Or more likely, not germinate. If they do grow, we plan to set up a shop specializing in leeks and courgettes. If they don't, the local supermarket, supplied by professionals with more talent and chemicals than us, will be happy with our continued custom.

TEMPELHOF, BERLIN, GERMANY – It looks a like a cross between a flower show and a junkyard. The old airport here will be redeveloped in 2016, but in the meantime, part has been turned into a set of miniature allotments. The gardeners are not allowed to plant into the ground, though, so they use pallets and crates to make temporary raised beds for their lettuces and onions.

Evelyn now wants to use the same idea in our garden. I point out that we *are* allowed to plant stuff in the ground, that I have just made some permanent raised beds, and that the pallets that people give us make great firewood. She is insistent. Fortunately I hold the trump card in this particular dispute: my chainsaw. Once it has converted a pallet into stove-ready lengths, they are hard to use for growing cucumbers.

NAIROBI, KENYA – What do lions do on a Sunday afternoon? Answer: the same as a lot of humans, at least when the kids are not around. I watched a lion going about his business with one of the lionesses in his harem. Very quick and efficient he was too. I waited to see what would happen next. "That's it", said the guide, who was standing next to me. "Nothing will happen for another 20 minutes."

20 minutes? My goodness, I must be getting old. Takes me a lot longer than that to recharge nowadays.

June

MÜLLENBERG – So what **do** lions do on a Sunday afternoon? "The same as humans: sleep" said Evelyn. "Watch football", said Regine, her sister. "Go for a walk", said the neighbour.

Oh dear, seems as if some enlightenment is needed. Especially with Evelyn.

MÜLLENBERG – We have bought some bees: they now buzz around the hives at the bottom of the garden, looking busier than us, at least. Evelyn has taken ownership of the left-hand hive: all the thousand or so bees in it are now called "Brünnhilde". Mine, in the right-hand hive, are all called "Wotan". I trust you spot the Wagnerian connection.

A drone's purpose in life is to fly around in the hope that a queen passes by on her honeymoon flight – the only time in the year that she leaves the hive. The drones crowd after her, and attempt to mate with her in mid-air. Each drone does his duty, then in the very act, stiffens and falls off. Dead. He is immediately replaced by the next drone, then the next... Well, maybe it's not too bad being a drone: a peaceful, pampered life, and what a nice way to die.

I'm working on it.

July

KOLOLI, GAMBIA – German can be such a succinct language. Take the wonderful word *Futterneid*, which roughly translates

as "fodder envy". *Futterneid* is what your cats have if they steal each other's food, even though they still have lots of exactly the same stuff in their own bowls.

It also happens to be the strategy that Gambian fishermen use to catch tuna. They keep a watch out for seagulls diving into the water to catch fish. The seagulls are in turn watching for the splashes made by tuna as the tuna hunt the smaller fish that seagulls eat. So the fishermen are taking advantage of the seagulls' envy towards the tuna. Spare a thought for the tuna, though: they are doing all the work chasing the small fish, but it is them that end up in the fishermen's boats – and on our plates.

It's not that easy, though. Instead of my morning jog along the beach, I helped a group of fishermen haul in their net. The result of an hour's work by ten men? No tuna: just seven small fish, a couple of crabs, and an octopus.

ZINSE, GERMANY – Jane is right most of the time, but sometimes she gets it horribly wrong. Jane (our satellite navigation system) directed us over the top of the Rothaargebirge, a picturesque range of hills where we wanted to go walking. Blindly following her orders, we ended up at a no-through-road sign, a mere 5.9 kilometres from our destination. The true distance by a motorable road? A mere 32 km.

August

MÜLLENBERG – The Queen is dead... Long live the Republic! Bad news for the hive full of bereaved Brünnhildes, who had somehow lost their monarch. Deliberate or accidental regicide, or a natural death? There was no inquest: we will never know.

We discovered the royal demise when we checked on the hive one evening to find several "queen cells" on the wax comb – large protuberances of wax that looked like peanut shells. The worker bees had realized their queen had departed this earth, and had converted regular cells into larger nurseries fit for princesses. Once they had emerged from these nurseries, the young queens did what all ambitious royals do: they hunted down and killed their rivals until only one was left. No room for sentimentality at the pinnacle of power.

While waiting for their new ruler, the worker bees did what all workers do in such situations: they loafed around outside. I swear that several were nursing glasses of beer.

RIVER LAAN, GERMANY – A paddle on the Laan would be uneventful if it were not for the pirates that infest this stretch of the river. Evelyn's and my double-seater came under constant attacks from Oliver and Julia's canoe, which tried to turn us around or force us into the bank.



What was that about drones and workers?

But good crew members are hard to find nowadays. My efforts to counterattack were made even more futile by Evelyn's intransigence: she dug in her paddle at critical moments to prevent me from forcing them into an overhanging tree. Then a saboteur disabled our rudder, fixing it up out of the water. "Steer!" said Evelyn. "I am steering!" I said, as we headed into the bank, the rudder waving uselessly in the breeze.

ADDIS ABABA, ETHIOPIA – Dead men don't cause traffic jams, do they? Yes, they do, if they are ex-prime ministers of Ethiopia. Meles Zenawi died a year ago today, and Addis came to a standstill as visiting presidents and assorted bigwigs were shuttled around to the various commemoration events. Everyone else was rather tired of the wall-to-wall tributes and interminable media biopics. And the traffic jams – especially those caused by the police blocking off streets to ensure that Omar al-Bashir, the president of Sudan (who has been indicted for genocide and war crimes by the International Criminal Court) can get to the venue on time.

ADDIS ABABA – "There's a power cut", said my artist friend Yitagesu as we bumped along the narrow cobbled street towards his studio. He positioned his van to shine the headlights through the window, and we went inside with a flashlight. The studio was about the size of a garage, with dozens of canvases lining the walls. I went into the back room, to be greeted by an enormous portrait of four nudes in a sauna. I asked him if he used models. "No" was the answer: "I work from memory and use my imagination." He had to finish some paintings that evening for an exhibition the next day, so I helped him load five canvases and a bucketful of paints and brushes into his van.

The exhibition was at the Sheraton, a palatial building on a hill in the middle of Addis, less than 2 km as the crow flies, but half a world away. Down the marble steps into a vast ballroom with crystal chandeliers and spotlights. Young artists with dreadlocks hovered around their paintings, hoping that one of the rich visitors would instruct the staff to put a sticker against their work, showing that it had been sold. One of Yitagesu's paintings had indeed found a buyer. He wants to use the money to buy a solar-powered light for his studio.

MÜLLENBERG – Evelyn can no longer see her feet. Not because of a sudden deterioration in her eyesight, and she has not started wearing an uplift bra. No: our bees objected to her tidying their hive, and they stung her under the eyes. It looked as if I had beaten her up. My alibi: I was in Ethiopia at the time, your honour.



Müllenbergs Cosmetics now offers a botox-free, wholly organic treatment for wrinkles. See below for an example of our treatment

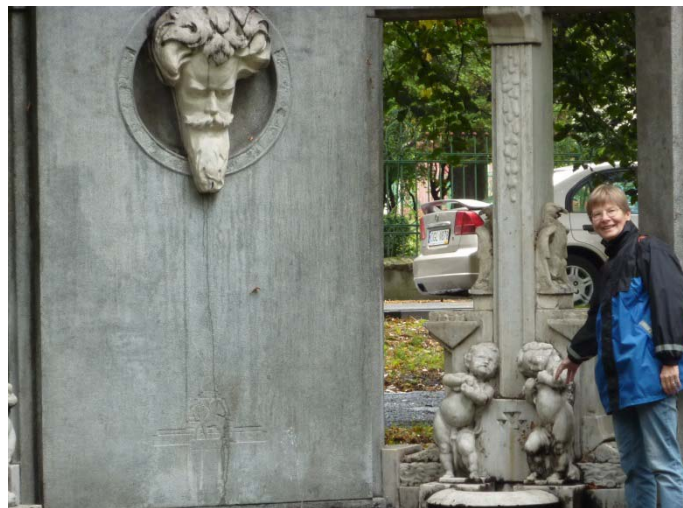


One advantage, though: any wrinkles she might have had (not that she has any, of course) were magically smoothed away. No botox necessary, and all fully organic.

September

WROCLAW, POLAND – I'm always pleased to see Oliver, but never more so than when he opened the fire door to free me. Instead of taking the hotel lift, I had gone down the stairs and found myself trapped between two locked doors. I could have smashed the glass to ring an alarm, but that seemed a little dramatic. I called Evelyn on my mobile, but she never hears her phone ringing: it's buried deep in the bowels of her handbag. Fortunately I had just enough battery left to call Oliver, who came to rescue me.

Wrocław is full of elderly Germans chasing memories. Including us: a gaggle of Evelyn's cousins had arranged to meet here to wander round the haunts of their parents and grandparents. Called Breslau until 1945, Wrocław was the capital of the German province of Silesia. Evelyn's great-grandfather, Johannes Reinelt, lived here. Under the pen-name "Philo vom Walde" (Philo of the Forest), he composed poetry in praise for the local woods. His memorial in Wrocław did not survive the Second World War, but one in the small town of Głybczyce (Leobschütz), 150 km to the east, still stands.



Spot the family resemblance: Evelyn with her great-grandfather in Głybczyce

OŚWIĘCIM, POLAND – Better known as Auschwitz – the concentration camp where the Nazis murdered more than a million people, most of them Jews. Thousands of photos of prisoners, shaven-headed and dressed in striped uniforms, line the corridors in the prison blocks. Every one of them has an enormous dignity. But most of the people who were shipped to Auschwitz in cattle wagons were not even photographed: they were taken straight to the gas chambers. One vast room is full of the hair shorn from the heads of dead women. The Nazis used it to make cloth.

Quiet, chilling, horrific. And overwhelmingly sad.

ČADCA, SLOVAKIA, and NOVÝ JIČÍN, CZECH REPUBLIC – Our family has a rule: if you want to say you have been to a country, you have to do two things: go through Customs, and have a pee. Fail to do both, and you haven't been there. So I have never been to Russia, even though I have spent several hours in Moscow airport: like Edward Snowden, I did not leave the transit lounge.

Thankfully, the border controls in most of Europe no longer exist (though for some unfathomable reason Britain insists on retaining them). So crossing into Slovakia and the Czech Republic is easy, allowing us to chalk up two more countries.

But there are several more reasons to visit this pretty corner of Europe: the picturesque towns, the romantic Carpathians, and the opportunity to test your computer's ability to render all those accents in the place names. Need help with the pronunciation? It's something like "Chatsa" and "Novec Jicheen".

October

BERN, SWITZERLAND – Go into a Migros supermarket for a six-pack, and you will search in vain. They sell soft drinks and non-alcoholic beer, but nothing stronger. No tobacco or girlie magazines either. Ethical reasons, apparently: they do not want to sell sinful products. Come out of the checkout, though, and turn left into the Denner discount supermarket next door, and you will find all the beer and tobacco you could want. The owner of the Denner chain? Er... Migros.

I think this is an excellent idea. I plan to found a wholly owned subsidiary called "Paul Freedom", for which I will work part-time. This firm will be able to do all the things I am currently not allowed to do: mowing the lawn on a Sunday, recycling bottles after 8 p.m., looking at attractive women...

MARBURG, GERMANY, 26 OCTOBER 2013 – Oliver and Julia's wedding day! They wrote their own wedding vows, which they memorized and recited to each other during the ceremony. They were along the lines of (I paraphrase):

Oliver: "Julia, I can't promise you that I will give up watching videos on the computer, but I do promise that I will hit the pause button if you want to talk to me."

Julia: "Oliver, I can't promise you that we will always have the same opinion, but I do promise that I will listen to you before you have to do what I want."

All very emotional: I must admit I shed a tear.

We were delighted that a big crowd of my relatives made it all the way from the UK. We were even more delighted that they responded to the invitation for "English women please wear hats". Steve (brother-in-law) and John (nephew) disregarded the "women" bit: they turned up in top hats and tails. Heads turned and doorways were filled with stares as the wedding party headed up to the Marburg castle for photos.

Evelyn's summary of the day: "I enjoyed it very much – a lot more than our wedding." I would agree with her, but that would probably not be very wise.



Julia's parents, Günther and Ingrid, coordinated the colour of their outfits. Oliver's parents did not.

November

MÜLLENBERG – Bees need enough food to get through the winter. So you open up the hive and check how much honey they have stashed away. Not enough? Then put a tray of sugarwater in the bottom of the hive so they won't starve. But bees in winter are just like people: they get annoyed if you let cold air in. The score with beestings is now Paul 7, Evelyn 6. If our bees had been children, they would have been sent off to bed without any tea.

They say that after 30 stings, they stop swelling. Only twenty-something stings to go, and maybe we'll have to reach for the botox to cure those wrinkles after all.

MÜLLENBERG – How to make applesauce: cut up the apples and put them in a pot on the stove. Bring to a boil, and stir to prevent it from sticking to the bottom of the pan and burning. But Evelyn was not quick enough replacing the lid: the sauce burped a boiling splodge into her face. Scalds on her cheek, chin and nose. It looked as if I had beaten her up again. My alibi this time: I was upstairs writing this letter, your honour.

December

MÜLLENBERG – Want to know where we live? Visit <http://what3words.com> and type in "above.gold.mountaintop". Neat, eh? Type in "loveliness.fullest.ditches" to find our bedroom.

What you won't see in the satellite image is me insulating our house. We want to reduce the amount of wood we burn for heating, so we are covering the walls with polystyrene blocks, then gluing tiles that look like bricks onto the polystyrene. Or perhaps I should say that Ulli, our neighbour, is doing the work, and I am helping him. Come and visit us now, and you can help him instead. I will go and check how Evelyn is getting on with the applesauce.

A very happy Diwali, Maulid, Christmas, Hanukkah, New Year, Tsagaan sar, Têt and Norooz. May you have as much fun in life as a drone, yet still avoid his fate. Don't trust your satnav, and keep an eye out for ticks. Let us know if you want to try out our botox alternative. And do check out that BBC site given at the top of the first page – it's very amusing.

Paul and Evelyn

