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“Not as many giggles as usual”, said Evelyn as she censored this year’s annual missive. Oh dear. So I’ve gone through it one more time to cut down on the social commentary and to add a few laughs. In this issue: how to lie to your mother (twice), why you should sing Abba early in the morning, how to say “raspberry” in Armenian, why Italy is full of ruins, and how to catch a swarm of bees. Plus, I hope, a chuckle or two.

### January

STRATFORD-UPON-AVON, UK – Let’s start with a maternal fib. Many years ago, my parents would take a carload of us squabbling children on “mystery tours” – which always ended up in the same place: Clacton-on-Sea, a mudflat on the Essex coast. So when we took my mother out for a ride at New Year, that’s where we said we were going. We stopped in Stratford “for lunch”, and it was only when we checked into the hotel that she twigged that this was our actual destination. First time I’ve ever managed to fool her. Sorry, Clacton: next year, maybe.

The evening was devoted to a play. I had not noticed when I booked that it was by a contemporary of Shakespeare’s so, naturally, was in Elizabethan English. At the break, Oliver and Julia confessed they had not understood very much. Neither had we... except for the bits that were in mediaeval Dutch – close enough to modern German for us to understand at least some.

MÜLLENBERG, GERMANY – Music has become a big part of our lives since I took up singing. Whenever Evelyn complains about the temperature, I trill a couple of bars of “You’re as cold as ice!” (Foreigner, 1977). If she comments on my driving, she gets “You’re driving me crazy” (Walter Donaldson, 1930). If she talks about her health, I break into “I’ve got an upset stomach and a broken heart” (Stevie Wonder, 1985). If she doesn’t like how I’m handling the stove, it’s “Come on baby, light my fire” (The Doors, 1967). She has started to retaliate in kind: “Sex bomb” (Tom Jones, 1999) – so now all our days are filled with song.

BERGISCH GLADBACH, GERMANY – It’s surprising how many people look in rubbish containers. The contract for our friend Heinz’s stationery shop had ended, and we were helping clear it out. We dumped armfuls of cardboard and plastic in a skip parked outside. A small group of hard-up-looking rummagers sorted through the debris and fished out cables and fittings that might fetch a few cents. Better-dressed passers-by also peered in, pulling out letter trays and storage boxes that might come in useful at home or in the office.

The shop had existed for 115 years. But competition is fierce: self-service shops with larger sales floors and smaller product ranges, and a vast assortment on the internet. When the landlord hiked the rent, Heinz was forced to pull the plug.

A piece of the town’s culture has disappeared, and an important chunk of its social fabric too. One young boy used to come into the shop to wait for his mother to pick him up; a mentally handicapped customer could always get items on credit and a warm word from the staff. Imagine that in a supermarket.

### February

FRASCATI, ITALY – We had not realized that Italy also celebrates Carnival, though on a mercifully smaller scale than the over-the-top Rhinelanders. A parade of half a dozen papier-mâché floats wound its way through the narrow streets of this mediaeval town, coming to frequent standstills as small children

ran out into the street. One group of marchers, depicting Pope Francis, I believe, decided they were bored of waiting for the jam to clear, and cut across the square through the crowd. The Italians make their own traffic rules, even in parades.

The Villa Aldobrandini is the grandest of the magnificent but crumbling villas that dot the Alban Hills above Rome. These edifices were built by popes, cardinals and Roman nobles during the 16th century, when Vatican finances were even less open to scrutiny than they are today. Oliver’s jogging route runs over a wall, around a gate, and through the wilderness behind Cardinal Aldobrandini’s pile. The water theatre was playing when we followed the trail: an artificial waterfall in a moss-covered amphitheatre. I don’t think the good cardinal envisaged riffraff such as us ever setting eyes on his private playground.

Gaze down at Rome from Frascati, and your eye is drawn to the “City of Sport”, a huge, white lattice structure shaped like a tent, designed by Santiago Calatrava, a Spanish architect notorious for cost overruns. It looks impressive, but it’s an empty shell: built for a world aquatics championships in 2009, it was never finished when the government ran out of cash.

Which gives rise to my theory: all those wonderful ancient ruins throughout the Roman world... they were never actually completed. The emperor at the time must have stopped construction work in order to pay for his bunga-bunga parties.

### March

ZANZIBAR, TANZANIA – The beach is lined with identikit hotels: long gravel driveway; open area with reception, coffee shop and restaurant; individual villas with thatched roofs and ethnic ambience; bar, pool and neat row of sun loungers; live band dressed in red Maasai blankets playing calypso and 1970s soft rock tunes; gaggle of elderly Western tourists sipping wine and clapping along to “Hakuna Matata”.

It doesn’t have much to do with the real Zanzibar: the Maasai live hundreds of kilometres away on the Tanzanian mainland, and calypso is from the Caribbean. Never mind, at least the tourists are happy, and the locals have jobs (even if they have to dress up as Maasai).

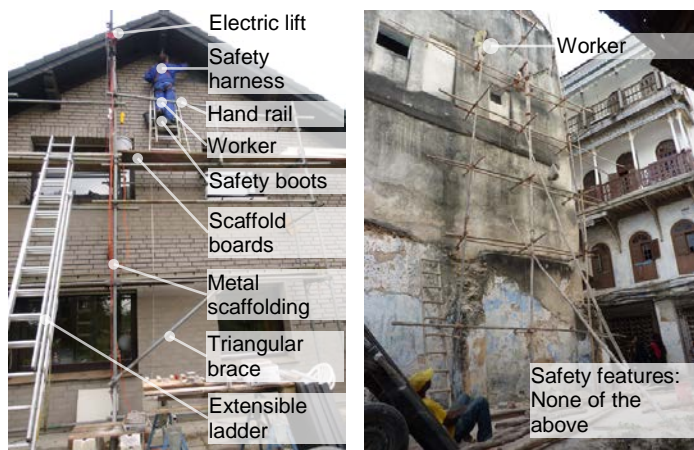
No sunbathing for me: I was coordinating a workshop of a dozen people hunched over computer screens. The holiday-makers? Most were doing the same as us: staring at glowing



*The riffraff invade Cardinal Aldobrandini’s private garden*

rectangles. Only they were sweating in the heat, while we were in an air-conditioned room; they were emailing their children while frittering away their inheritance, we were getting paid.

STONE TOWN, ZANZIBAR – I wandered through this former slaving town, taking photos of the ornately carved wooden doors and getting lost in the warren of alleys. But I failed to find the old slave market, where the Indian and Arab merchants would buy and sell slaves (doubtless including many Maasai) to ship across the ocean. So I asked my taxi driver to take me there. Alas, he knew only five words of English, which is still two more than I can speak of Swahili. His vocabulary included “market” but not “slave”. Instead of the slave market, he took me to the local supermarket.



*Health and safety in Müllenberg and Zanzibar*

ZANZIBAR AIRPORT – The plane had a technical defect, so my flight was cancelled. The booking clerk issued me with a new ticket: from Nairobi to Amsterdam to Cologne that evening, then from Zanzibar to Nairobi the next day. I couldn’t figure out how that routing might work, but it didn’t matter: the second flight was cancelled too.

The airline, inappropriately dubbed “Precision Air”, booked me into a hotel nearby. Now at least you know what to do if you want to stay at a hotel in Zanzibar: just turn up at the reception desk and say “Precision Air”, and you get a free room.

MÜLLENBERG – I got home to find a single red rose in a vase in our living room. “It’s World Women’s Day”, said Evelyn. “The Social Democrats were giving roses away at the supermarket.” And she expects me to believe her?

STOKE PRIOR, HEREFORDSHIRE, UK – “You lied to me!” My mother has a fine sense of justice and a strong belief in the Fires of Hell. And yes, she was right: I had said we would be in Germany. In fact we were waiting for her in the pub, along with the rest of the numerous Mundy clan, for what she thought would be a small lunch to celebrate her 85th birthday.

Fortunately, redemption was at hand, in the shape of the parish priest, who had also been invited to the party. I made a public confession and requested absolution. He said that I would first have to repent for the sin. I’m still on the road to Hell after all.

## April

STANSTED AIRPORT, UK – Never, ever try to reduce the weight of your check-in luggage by unpacking your wife’s toiletries bag. It will contain an infinite number of assorted liquids and gels, which you are not allowed to put in your carry-on baggage. And you will inevitably forget to take out the nail file, tweezers, scissors and penknife. You will realize you have these in your hand baggage shortly before you go through the security check. What to do if you commit this error? Go to the stationers in the check-in area, buy some envelopes and stamps, wrap the sharps up and mail them home. Then join the queue for the security

check, have your bags sniffed for bombs and drugs, realize that you are late for your plane, and sprint through the dawdling crowds to the gate. Suggest that your wife enrol in a course on anger management. Rejoice if you catch your flight, and rejoice further when, a few days later, the sharps arrive in the mail. You have been fully rehabilitated!

MÜLLENBERG – Evelyn doesn’t like my new deodorant. So I’ve started what scientists call a “blind study”: in the bathroom each morning, she closes her eyes while I apply a deodorant – either mine or hers. At the end of the day, she sniffs my armpits and tells me which deodorant I’ve used. Problem is, she doesn’t believe me when I tell her she’s wrong. Scientists call this a “blind and deaf study”. Evelyn says my memory is fading: she says I cannot remember which deodorant I chose.

## May

AUTOROUTE DU SOLEIL, FRANCE – Evelyn seems to think that when we’re on the motorway passing a column of slow-moving lorries, the cars behind us somehow have a greater right to overtake than we do. She opines that I should steer into a gap between the lorries so the following cars can pass.

I suggested that instead of complaining about my driving style, she should award me a “carrot” whenever I did anything right. On the trip to the south of France, I managed to accumulate five such carrots, doubtless to the delight of the tailback of vehicles behind us. She can award “sticks” too, but these have so far been mercifully rare.

CAMP FERRIER, AUDE, FRANCE – As thanks for the help clearing out his shop, Heinz invited us to celebrate his birthday in the foothills of the Pyrenees. The few French natives still in these villages are all elderly; the empty houses have been bought as retirement or holiday homes by Brits or Germans (like Heinz). Without the newcomers, the villages would be abandoned.

I grew up in a place called Brentwood, a nondescript dormitory town northeast of London. Since leaving there 40 years ago, I have never met anyone else who admits to being from there. Until now: the people running our bed-and-breakfast in Camp Ferrier were from Brentwood. And the owner of the restaurant hosting Heinz’s party attended my secondary school. I even remembered him: an entrepreneur even in his youth, he was expelled from school for trading marijuana.



*The Pyrenees are behind you...*

LUCKNOW, INDIA – Young and in love? Want a couple of romantic hours together? Simple: come to the Residency in Lucknow, the scene of a bitter, 5-month siege during the Indian Mutiny. It’s a lot more peaceful now: the ruins sit in a park with monuments to the memory of both sides. Pay 5 rupees per person and you can wander around the ruins, sit together under a shady tree, caress and cuddle, well away from prying prospective in-laws. If you happen to be a non-Indian, though, your tête-à-tête is a bit pricier: it costs 100 rupees to get in. That’s a 2,000% mark-up for foreign love-birds.

## June

MÜLLENBERG – “You should get up earlier!” said Evelyn, pushing the newspaper across the breakfast table. An article about birds: if a male great tit starts singing late in the morning, his mate may grab a quickie with an earlier bird. As a result, the sleepyhead may end up raising chicks fathered by someone else.

A threat serious enough to warrant action. This morning I woke before the alarm clock, perched on the edge of the bed and started singing Abba songs. I will continue doing so until Evelyn gives me a watertight assurance that any offspring we may jointly raise in the future are mine.

KOBLENZ, GERMANY – The European pastoralists’ conference was over, but the Saami delegates wanted to continue celebrating into the night. The hotel bar was closed, but they raided the cellar anyway. Next morning the hotel discovered a crate of beer and a bottle of Bacardi in the beer garden: both empty. The delegates had already left to catch their flight back to northern Finland, and had neglected to pay for the drinks. The conference organizers had to shell out cash and apologies to placate the hotel manager.

Pastoralists in Uganda believe that all cattle belong to them by right – a justification for raiding their neighbours’ livestock. Could it be that the Saami have a similar belief about alcohol?

## July

MÜLLENBERG – A doorbell ringing before 9:00 in the morning can mean only one thing: a visit by the Angel of Doom. In the form of Ulli, our neighbour, bearing grim tidings: he reported that the drain in front of the garage was blocked... that meant digging up the driveway.

The next day, the bell rang again. “Lots of your bees are flying around in circles”, said the Angel. “Is that normal?”

No, it’s not normal: the Wotans were swarming. (Our bees, regular readers will recall, are named after characters in Wagner operas.) Why do they always decide to leg it on the hottest day of the year? We dashed down the garden with a ladder, buckets, grilles, water spray, branch lopper... all the tack needed to catch a swarm. Two hours and a mutilated sloe tree later, we had caught the bees in a bucket and transferred them to a new hive, a couple of metres from where they had come from. Will they have learned that attempts to escape are hopeless?

BILSTEIN, KÜRTEN, GERMANY – Terror, war, oppression and persistent poverty: all are pushing refugees and economic migrants into Europe, often across the perilous Mediterranean. A rising number end up in our district, where the council puts them up in temporary accommodation.

One friend of ours has turned her hotel into a refugee home. Another has bought an old farmhouse in Bilstein, a village a few kilometres away, and has rented it to the council to house refugees. She plans to turn the barn into a cultural centre where people can learn German, play music and make art. They can



Centrifuging honey – we harvested 65 kg this year

use the garden to grow vegetables (and – who knows – keep bees?). The rent from the house will go to run the cultural centre. We have formed a club to support her. Evelyn is vice-chair; I somehow got landed with the job of treasurer. Evelyn is optimistic. If I can manage the club finances, she reasons, then I’m perfectly capable of handling our own tax affairs too. A no-win situation, I feel.

Some of the neighbours in Bilstein are worried and suspicious. They have sent us unfriendly emails, and complained to the local council about the influx of foreigners into their quiet neighbourhood. The mayor invited the villagers and us to a meeting to discuss their concerns. Some were hostile: “You’ve ruined my life!”, said one. But others, especially the older people, were very supportive: “We do hope there will be some children in the village”, said another.

## August

CIVITA DI BAGNOREGIO, ITALY – It’s supposed to be “wheelchair-accessible”. But beware: the path up to this mediaeval town is long and steep, and the weather was sweltering. Linda, Julia’s sister, plays wheelchair tennis, but the slope was too much even for her trained arms. We had all earned an ice cream by the time we got to the top – even me, who did nothing but take photos.

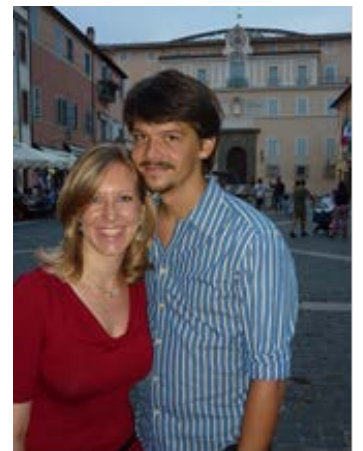


Steep, hot, but worth the push

CASTELGANDOLFO, ITALY – Josef Ratzinger, Benedict XVI, is in residence in the palace here. But postcards of the Pope Emeritus were scarce in the souvenir shop in the town square. And the restaurant waitress didn’t know who he was. He doesn’t seem to have made a very big splash in town.

## September

BILSTEIN – There are now children in Bilstein. The first residents of the refugee house have arrived: a family of four and a single woman, all Armenians. They don’t speak German, and we don’t have a clue about Armenian or Russian. Despite the language barrier, we are trying to teach them the most important things they need to know about living in Germany, such as how to buy a bus ticket and which bin to put recyclable rubbish in.



Julia, Oliver, but no sign of Ratz

Anyone else could have moved into the house straight away: after all, it has been lived in for the last 200 years. But asylum-seekers don’t “reside”, they “are accommodated”. A whole slew of fire-safety rules kick in, which the authorities apply strictly: the staircase was boarded up to prevent people from going upstairs, and the owner has to install a fire escape (cost: over €10,000) before the upper storey can be used.

Just one complaint from the neighbour whose life we had somehow ruined: the new residents had eaten some of the raspberries in her garden. “Don’t take the raspberries” in Armenian is “ch’yen dzernmarkel aznvamori”.



*Another good reason not to move to Reading*

## October

READING, UK – Most people dream of a move in the opposite direction. But Julia has swapped Frascati (a glorious picture-book of a town overlooking sunny Rome) with Reading (an architecturally challenged agglomeration near rain-sodden London). Her employer has the snappy name of “European Centre for Medium-Range Weather Forecasts”, but her work has nothing to do with weather, forecasts or medium-range – or indeed Europe, for that matter. Instead, she is making the centre’s huge collection of climate data more accessible, so people can tell how global warming is likely to affect them.

Oliver still lives in Frascati and works at the Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN in Rome. He does communication work for a network for pastoralists. He says he now finally understands what Evelyn and I do for a living. Meanwhile, Oliver and Julia are racking up air miles and boosting their carbon-dioxide footprint, thereby contributing to global warming and the continuation of Julia’s job. Resourceful.

FRANKFURT AIRPORT, GERMANY – A social-engineering tip overheard in a security queue: an airport manager describing how to keep travellers happy. “Passengers would get off the plane, arrive at the carousel and wait for their bags. If they had to wait more than a few minutes, they would start to complain. We found that if they had to walk further before they got to the baggage reclaim, the bags would be there before them. Walking time is not waiting time. No more complaints!”

BANGKOK, THAILAND – Walk into one of the 7-Eleven convenience stores that grace nearly every street corner here, and you come face to face with the future. All the merchandise – crisps, noodles, sweets – is packed in brightly coloured, shiny plastic. The range is tiny, and nothing is remotely nutritious: all the food is processed, fried or smothered with sugar, salt and preservatives before it lands in one of the garish bags. You can almost feel yourself contracting diabetes by osmosis.

At least in Bangkok, you do not have to patronize a 7-Eleven if you are hungry. Unlike in many cities where convenience stores dominate local food sales (leading to the phenomenon of city-centre “food deserts”), you can buy from one of the many vendors that peddle delicious street food to passers-by.

## November

KÜRTEEN, GERMANY – Germans just love complexity. Example: bus tickets. There are dozens of options, all purporting to save you money. But woe betide if you buy the wrong ticket, or forget to date-stamp it: the ticket inspectors are merciless.

Understanding this labyrinthine system is a problem for locals, let alone for refugees who don’t speak German. Many have been slapped with €60 fines, so we have written a guide and translated it into various languages. Even so, the refugees continue to discover new ways to fall foul of the rules: the



*Weddings – this one for nephew Jonathan’s wedding to Jess – mean we can dress up and pretend to belong to polite society*

wrong combination of identity cards and tickets; stamping tickets in the wrong place; assuming that a monthly pass is valid not just for the current calendar month, but for four weeks after it was purchased. We are planning an updated edition for 2016. Neo-Nazi marches and arson attacks on refugee housing have been grabbing the headlines. But in general, Germans have been very open to the sudden influx of newcomers. Many themselves come from a refugee background: Evelyn’s mother, for example, was forced to flee from her home in Silesia (now southern Poland) at the end of the Second World War. A family history of such hardship means they understand what’s it’s like to be uprooted. Areas that lack such a history have been more hostile. Ironically, those very same areas would benefit economically from an influx of eager young workers.

## December

ZISCHENDORF, BAVARIA, GERMANY – Christmas Eve with Julia’s parents meant obligatory attendance at the nativity play in the church. Her American relatives were also visiting, so we turned up early to make sure we got a pew. “Who are all these strangers?” complained a couple of old biddies at the back. “They’ve taken our places.” Don’t worry, we’ll be gone soon, and you can have them back next week.



That evening, the Christkind (“Christ child”) came to distribute presents. This children’s myth was invented by Martin Luther as competition for Santa Claus. The Christkind turned out to be an attractive young woman dressed in a white dress and veil, who read out motivational half-truths from her Golden Book: “X has been good with his homework this year,” “Y has played nicely with her younger siblings”.

Alas, the Christkind somehow skipped me. But she’s most welcome to drop by when we get back to Müllenberg. I just hope I’ve been good enough to merit a present.

A very happy Diwali, Maulid, Christmas, Hanukkah, New Year, Chūnjié, Tsagaan sar, Têt and Norooz.

Paul and Evelyn