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December 2016

Time for our annual description of debacles and disasters. Here's what not to mention on the radio in Dubai, how to spray your driveway with hot wax, how to buy tef, how to become German, and where to play the digeridoo. If you supported Britain's decision to leave the EU, you might want to skip June. And if you like Donald Trump, I suggest you avoid November.

January

MÜLLENBERG, GERMANY – I must have tripped over some demographic hurdle: I've started getting spam emails inviting me for "senior dating". Any way that I can get back into the "looking for sexy teens" category?

BANGKOK, THAILAND – The veterinary department where Evelyn did her doctorate used to be a two-storey building in an open campus. It has progressed: it is now a complex of tightly packed buildings of up to ten storeys and includes a swimming pool for dogs.

BOGOR, JAVA, INDONESIA – "I have a dream": the choir trilled Abba's 1979 hit, just missing the highest notes. The screen showed photos of our friend Isye's research: one with her arm up to her shoulder in a cow's backside; another of her beside sedated stag, using an artificial vagina to collect semen. Everyday tasks for a specialist in artificial insemination.

Isye had invited Evelyn to attend her inauguration as professor at the university where they both worked 30 years ago. Isye is still at the university, doing research on sperm morphology and teaching students how to molest ruminants. Among the highlights of her career: research on the reproduction of the Javan rhinoceros. Question: how does one collect sperm from a rhinoceros? Answer: very carefully.

One of Evelyn's Indonesian friends had asked her to bring some German engineering with her: a brand-name umbrella. She duly took one to Indonesia, then discovered it was made in China. Try as you might, you cannot escape globalization.

February

TANJUNG PANDAN, BELITUNG, INDONESIA – The United Nations tells its staff to request hotel rooms on the first or second floors: the ground floor might be attacked by terrorists, and if they set fire to the building, you want to be able to jump out the window. But in fact it's a lot safer to be on the fifth floor or above: mosquitoes don't fly that high, and malaria and dengue kill a lot more people than terrorism.

After her inauguration, Isye invited Evelyn to a wellness weekend in Belitung, an island in the South China Sea. Not a tourist to be seen, despite the wonderful sandy beaches. The only tourist attraction seems to be a "museum of words", set up by a local author, that features Asterix, Obelix, the Flintstones and the immortal quotes of Britney Spears. Get there before the tourist influx ruins it.

ISTANBUL, TURKEY – No trip to Istanbul is complete without a boat trip up the Bosphorus. Dreamy palaces by the water's edge; fortresses guarding the narrows; two suspension bridges, lit in constantly changing colours; massive Turkish flags on the heights to intimidate the Russian cargo ships that wind their way from the Black Sea to the Mediterranean. And of course the belly dancer who entertains diners on the boat: a lady of generous charms who will invite you to dance with her. My



advice: sit at the back, avoid eye contact, and on no account slip banknotes into the elastic of her bikini.

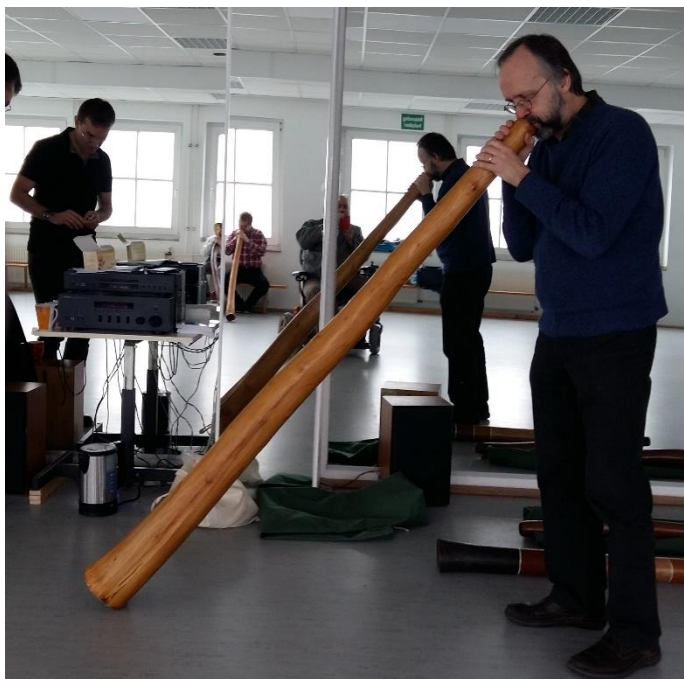
March

BILSTEIN, KÜRTEEN – Every Saturday, Evelyn arranges for eight or ten refugees to work in the overgrown garden of the old farmhouse our friend Christa has bought. They are pulling out the grass and planting vegetable beds: onions, potatoes, beans, carrots, courgettes, pumpkins... A local organic farm has donated seedlings; other people have given spades, forks and boots. We have repaired the fence, mended the gate and are clearing out the barn. After a few hours' work we sit round a table, eat the *injera* the Eritreans have brought, and talk in German. It's slow-going, but they are learning.



Syrians, Eritreans, Iraqis, Armenians... and a German

BERGISCH GLADBACH, GERMANY – Where is the best place to play a digeridoo? In the ladies' toilets: that is where the acoustics are best. Put one end of the "didge" in the corner, apply your mouth to the other end, loosen your lips, and blow. Experts can vary the tone and keep the sound going by breathing in and blowing out at the same time. I can't. The best I can do is to make a short-lived noise that at least sounds at home in the loo.



Make sure the ladies' is vacant before trying this in an optimal acoustic ambience

April

NAIVASHA, KENYA – Halfway through the writeshop, it disappeared: the box of chocolates that I use to compensate authors for the pain and humiliation I inflict on their manuscripts. The humans blamed the monkeys that roam around the hotel grounds looking for goodies.

The chocolates started reappearing in odd places: on my work table while I was away, on the floor of my tent (part of the hotel consists of tents erected on a platform over the lake), and then on the desk by my bed (even though the tent was padlocked all day). I never did discover the thief, or who was teasing me in this cruel manner. The monkeys? They blamed the humans.

May

KÜRTEEN, GERMANY – Unlike stingy Britain, Germany has been generous in opening its borders to the flood of refugees fleeing mayhem in the Middle East and poverty and oppression in Africa. While German bureaucracy creaks into action, we have started a project to help the 300-or-so refugees that have found a temporary home in Kürteen. We interview them, register them with the Employment Agency (which allocates them to German courses and job internships), and give them a professional CV to present to potential employers.

It's striking how much wasted talent the CVs reflect. About a quarter of the refugees have been to university – several have master's degrees. Half have been to secondary school, while the rest have attended only primary school (or have never been to school at all). Several have big gaps in their schooling – interrupted by war or, in Afghanistan, the Taliban's ban on girls going to school. Many have made ends meet by working in jobs far below the capabilities reflected in their CVs.

Now they are faced by the rigidities of the German employment system, which relies heavily on language ability and formal qualifications. To get a job as a lorry driver, you must pass your B1-level test in German and spend €11,000 on training and a license. To work as a house painter, carpenter or hairdresser, you need language ability (so you can understand customers and the health-and-safety regulations) and must attend between 6

months and 3 years of training. That's an eternity for the young men who have come to Germany to earn money to send back to their families in a camp in Turkey or Jordan.

And then they have to get a work permit, which can take 6 weeks or more. By the time it comes through, the would-be employer has hired someone else, or the job has evaporated.

June

GUDOW, SCHLESWIG-HOLSTEIN, GERMANY – When Evelyn's mother fled her home in Breslau (now Wrocław in Poland) at the end of the Second World War, she arrived here with nothing other than a pram containing her young daughter, Sibylle, and a photo album. Helmut, her father, was a prisoner of war in what is now Slovenia. Eva-Maria and Sibylle were billeted on a farm: they lived above the pigsty. They lived there for several years until Helmut returned from captivity.

The Iron Curtain that ran just east of Gudow depressed the local economy. The border and watchtowers have now gone, thank goodness, and today, this is a pretty tourist area with lakes and cycling paths. We have come a long way since 1989.

MÜLLENBERG – But not far enough. My countrymen have narrowly voted to leave the European Union. The result of decades of red-top press hostility, pusillanimous politicians, civil war in both the Conservative and Labour parties, a flaccid campaign by Remainers, and overt lies by the Little Englanders who pushed for Brexit. The most likely result? The breakup of the UK, a poorer, more insular and nationalistic England, and a weakened Europe more dominated by a reluctant Germany.

All that even though the EU owes a lot to Britain's influence. The single market, competition policy, eastward expansion: all are largely thanks to Britain.

It could have been very different. What if the Lib-Dems had not imploded at the last election? If Labour had not committed suicide by electing an unelectable leader? If Cameron had had a bit more gumption to face down the Brexiteers? If Boris Johnson had jumped the other way? If, over the last 40 years, Britain had decided to play an active, helpful role in Europe instead of sulking in the corner and acting the awkward bugger?

Regular readers will recall my mother's reaction to my suggestion that I might take German citizenship if Britain were to vote to leave the EU: "Don't you dare!" But we have a house in Germany, and many of my clients employ only EU citizens. So I have little choice. While the UK is still part of the EU, I can qualify for dual nationality. After Britain leaves, that option may well be closed.

I'm not the only one. I went to the registration office in the town hall in Kürteen a few days after the Brexit vote. "You're the third Brit this week to apply", they said.

July

EBSDORFERGUND-BELTERSHAUSEN, GERMANY – Yes, that's a real place name. Germans string together the names of districts and their constituent villages with hyphens, and then expect normal mortals to know how to pronounce and spell them.

This village happens to be where Evelyn's sister Regine lives. Over their careers as professors of Japanese studies, Regine and her husband amassed something like 100,000 books about Japan, mostly in Japanese. They have stored this immense accumulation of erudition in their house, and in several rented properties nearby. Our nightmare scenario was that they would pass away, lumbering us with their collection.

That is thankfully unlikely. Now retired, Regine and Erich have struck a deal with a Japanese institute in Alsace: they are donating the collection to establish a library there, in return for accommodation. So we can look forward to some excellent Alsace wine rather than feeling obliged to learn Japanese.

MÜLLENBERG – Don't believe everything you read in the newspaper. An article in the *Kölner Stadt-Anzeiger* said that Evelyn and I met in Malaysia; we always thought it was Indonesia. And it said that I was teaching young Africans how to use smartphones. "Isn't it the other way round?" Oliver wanted to know. Yes: it was software specialists from Ghana and Uganda who were explaining to me how their apps worked: I was merely writing up their work. See tinyurl.com/z96eavf for an abbreviated version of the newspaper article.

It was the second newspaper article this year. Earlier, the *Stadt-Anzeiger* carried a story about the gardening project in Bilstein. And it wouldn't be the last bit of media coverage...

August

MÜLLENBERG – "Please don't mention the dogshit bags." Radio Dubai wanted to interview me about my airsickness bag collection, but felt that my parallel collection of canine poop receptacles was inappropriate for listeners in a Muslim country. The producer called me a few minutes before the live interview and asked me to avoid the subject. Maybe they would have been more interested if I had told them that it was the world's biggest such collection?

BUKEDEA, UGANDA – How do rural Ugandans show gratitude? They give you a chicken. Oliver, Julia and a group of friends run a project to support poor Ugandan children to go to school. The children's parents presented the group with six live birds. But what to do with six chickens? It would be rude to give them back. The group consisted of one vegetarian, two flexitarians, three meat lovers, and one person who ate meat but did not want to be responsible for the chickens' deaths. The compromise: take a couple of chickens to eat on the safari after the school visits. Sell the other four and buy a young goat to give to a family. The goat will, it is hoped, multiply. But that gives rise to a new problem: what to do with the goats?

Oliver and Julia's organization is called Glocal Lifelearn. It currently supports 26 children who would not otherwise go to school. If you are interested in helping a child, visit www.glocal-lifelearn.org/en/Welcome.html



A gift for flexitarians



"You always give me trees for my birthday!"

September

MÜLLENBERG – Not knowing what to give Evelyn for her birthday two years ago, I scribbled picture of a tree on a card with the text "Tree coupon: A tree of your choice for the garden". She never cashed that in, so when I was equally stumped for ideas last year, I gave her another coupon. Quick, easy, and above all, no financial outlay required.

This year I gave her another card with a tree on it. She was just launching into the expected tirade of abuse when a tractor rolled up the driveway, pulling a tree. Or rather, several ex-trees, in bundles of split logs, ready to be cut up for firewood.

Firewood? Yes, there's a story behind that too. Every couple of months I used to hitch a trailer to the car and drive into Cologne, where I would load it with wooden freight pallets donated by a friend. Chopped up and thrown into the oven, these pallets have kept us warm for several winters in a row. But Evelyn objected to the time it took to collect them, the effort required to chop them up, the thermal capacity of the wood, and the presence of nails in the ash pan. "Why can't we have good wood?" she complained. Well, now she has some. Sitting on our driveway, in large bundles. She still doesn't realize that it's her wood, so she is responsible for cutting it into lengths suitable to feed the stove.

LERWICK, SHETLAND, UK – The bidders were concerned: who was the white-haired woman sitting in the sheep auction next to a well-known local crofter? At least she was not a competitor: she did not purchase any of the lambs or ewes on sale.

My 86-year-old mother was sitting hard on her hands, terrified of doing anything that the auctioneer might interpret as a bid. We were visiting the auction to chase up the last details of our book on Shetland sheep. We had taken my mother along as our in-house knitting consultant: she has contributed a pattern



With crofter Norman Leask at Britain's northernmost fish-and-chip shop



Two Fair Isle sweaters and a knitting consultant

showing how to knit a sheep. She felt a lot more at home in the wool shops that line Commercial Street in Lerwick: her bag on the plane home was bulging with yarn.

October

BERGISCH GLADBACH, GERMANY – It’s not easy becoming German. Among the many hoops you have to jump through is a citizenship test: 33 multiple-choice questions about the Germany, its laws and culture. Who wrote the German national anthem? Who appoints the federal cabinet? Which is the coat of arms of North-Rhine Westphalia? It asks nothing remotely useful, of course, like whether you can bribe the police (“no”), whether you can turn right at a red light (“no”), or whether you are allowed to mow your lawn on a Sunday (“no” – unless you live in a rural area like us, when the answer is “yes”). Unless you are married to Evelyn, when the answer reverts to “no”).

There were about a dozen of us waiting to do the test. The examiner took 17½ minutes to explain how to do it, then invited us to turn our papers over. It took me 3½ minutes to finish the test: I was out before Evelyn had had a chance to park the car.

The results came a couple of weeks later. Yes, I had passed. On to the next hoop: the language test.

FLORENCE, ITALY – Screeeeek... the ramp down into the basement car park tightened up, and I scraped the side of the hire car against the railing. Scratches along the door and sill; bill from the car-hire firm: €460. Compare that with the €2000 that we had to claim from our insurance for a minor accident with less damage in Germany. Lesson: if you’re going to have an accident, have one in Italy.

VOLTERRA, ITALY – Visitor tips for this charming hilltop Tuscan town: remember where you park your car, and remember the way from your car into the main square. It’s easy to get lost in the maze of mediaeval alleyways and steps. We, along with Julia’s parents Ingrid and Günther, ended up at the bottom of the hill but on the wrong side of the town, and had to walk several kilometres to find the car (fortunately easily recognizable because of the scratches along the side). The name of the long, winding road we traipsed along: Avenue of the Philosophers.

BAHIR DAR, ETHIOPIA – Several of the glass panes in the façade of the building where my project is housed were smashed. The

project sign was lying broken in the foyer. Workers were installing aluminium bars on the doors. A week before I arrived here, a crowd had attacked the building and smashed the sign. Why? Because the sign featured an Ethiopian flag, and the demonstrators were protesting against the government. No one was hurt: the building was empty at the time as everyone was on strike. No problems while I was there: the government had imposed a state of emergency and order had been restored.

Evelyn is always nervous when I travel somewhere exotic. I have learned not to tell her about such events till I get home.

BAHIR DAR – The rainy season had just finished, so Lake Tana was high. The path along the shore was flooded, so I decided to jump from one stone to another to get across. “No, Paul!” said my friend Yitagesu as I leaped across. He was right: the far bank I was aiming for turned out to be a floating patch of vegetation.

I was in luck. My mobile phone didn’t fall out of my pocket; the water only came up to my knees; and there were no crocodiles nearby. And it was dusk, so no one noticed that my trousers were wet as we walked back. By the time we got back to the hotel, they had dried off. Lesson: when walking by the lake, let the other person go first.

BAHIR DAR – You don’t buy tef flour in the supermarket. Go to the grain section of the market instead, where traders sit behind sacks of millet, sorghum and tef – a grain native to the Horn of Africa. You take a handful of the tiny grains from a sack and peer closely, pushing it around with your finger. You shake your head, put the handful back, and move to the next trader’s stall. Repeat several times, perhaps inquiring after the price if the grain looks promisingly soft and free of dirt.

Once you have made your choice, haggle a bit, watch like a hawk as your grain is weighed out, pay someone for a plastic-lined sack, then pay someone else to carry your newly purchased grain around the corner to the miller.

The miller is easy to spot: he looks like a ghost. Covered in flour, he pours your tef into the hopper of a rattling cleaner that sieves out a surprising amount of dust and chaff. He then puts the cleaned grain into the hopper above the mill: a whirring contraption that grinds the grain into fine white powder disconcertingly quickly.

Your sack (or sacks – I needed two) are then expertly sewn shut, and you can carry them to your donkey cart – or in my case, car.



Seeking the answer to the ultimate question: where’s the car?

Why go through this rigmarole in order to buy flour? Because of the entrepreneurship of Ethiopian traders. Demand for tef is greater than the supply, so the obvious thing is to skimp on weights, or to dilute the precious tef with other types of flour. That is why you buy your grain in the market yourself and watch it carefully as it is weighed, cleaned and milled.

It's not just tef that is debased. Chili powder – a vital ingredient in Ethiopian cuisine – is rumoured to be adulterated with powdered bricks.

BECHEN, GERMANY – Our Eritrean friends were delighted when I presented them with a 10-kilo bag of tef flour and a kilo of brick-free chili powder. They were even more delighted when I told one of them to go to the car and fetch a second sack with the remaining 20 kilos. A few days later they invited us to a meal of *injera* – the sour pancake made from tef that is the staple food in both Eritrea and Ethiopia. Washed down with a fizzy drink made, they said, from bread. I'll let you know if they give me the recipe.

MÜLLENBERG – Our bees have not been very productive this year: only 16 kilos of honey, compared to 65 kg last year. But they've been good at making beeswax, which we have to melt down and clean before we can recycle it.

To clean wax, you need several empty hive boxes and lid, a metal funnel that fits on top, frames full of old wax, a wallpaper steamer, a bucket, and a pair of Evelyn's tights. Chop the tights off above the knee and tie knots in the legs (it's best to take Evelyn out of them first). Wrap the sorry remainder of the tights around the grille that fits on the funnel, put the bucket underneath, and pile the boxes with frames on top of each other, with the lid on top. Set up the steamer to inject steam into the boxes. The wax will melt, run down into the tights, which filters out all the beeshit and dead larvae. Glorious yellow wax will collect in the bucket below.

Got that? Just make sure that the steamer pipe sticks up high enough above the funnel. If not, the molten wax will run back down the pipe into the steamer and start spurting out of the safety valve, spraying your driveway with a layer of beautifully clean, golden wax. Make sure you move your car first.

November

MÜLLENBERG – How stupid can you get? The Americans have gone and elected a racist, misogynistic, bigoted, tax-dodging con-man without any policies that make sense.¹ Have they caught the same disease as the Brits? At least in four years, or eight if they are feeling particularly masochistic, they can elect someone slightly more sensible. For Britain, though, it will take a generation to repair the damage caused by Brexit. Meanwhile, we are all in for a rocky ride.

BERGISCH GLADBACH – German bureaucracy is famed for its consistency but not for its common sense. To prove I can speak enough German to qualify for citizenship, it's not enough for me to wander into an office and chat to an official in the glorious language of Schiller and Goethe. No, I have to cough up €175 and spend an entire morning taking a German test – the same B1 test that refugees must pass for a stab at a decent job.

This time I was the only examinee. I whipped through the reading comprehension and writing sections; the listening test was on a CD, so took 25 minutes. The speaking consisted of a role-play to plan that most German of events, a street party. We tried to make it as realistic as possible: we agreed to register it with the police and discussed whether to invite the warring neighbours.



"[I]f you believe you're a citizen of the world, you're a citizen of nowhere. You don't understand what the very word 'citizenship' means." – Theresa May, October 2016

I plead guilty. Can I have a German passport, please?

December

BERGISCH GLADBACH, GERMANY – "10 minutes 36 seconds. Congratulations, healthy pace. Keep it up!" My new smart watch vibrates on my wrist when it feels it has something important to tell me. It doesn't just tell the time; it also measures my pulse, walking speed and calorie burn. It tells me that I have slept for 8 hours 13 minutes with 94% efficiency. It buzzes if I stay seated for more than 50 minutes, and lauds me if I actually get up. It even congratulated me on my pace while I was walking around the supermarket looking for coffee filters. But did it really take me 10 minutes 36 seconds to find them?

MÜLLENBERG – The results of my German language test have arrived. They mean that the only impediment to a successful application for German citizenship is my need for a recommendation from my wife. Maybe I can bribe her with firewood? Or threaten not to cut any into stove-ready lengths?

KÜRTEEN – Many years ago, just before Christmas, Eric Abbott, my major professor at Iowa State University, turned up on our doorstep with a Christmas tree and a box of decorations. Totally unexpected, and extraordinarily thoughtful and generous. We have been trying to repay him ever since. Not by giving him Christmas trees and baubles, but by trying to do other people similar favours.

I saw one of the refugees we know in Aldi today, along with his 12-year-old son. The boy mentioned that he played the piano, but didn't have one at home. The group of refugee helpers here in Kürten have a system to look for items that refugees need but cannot afford – clothes, furniture, appliances. Within 24 hours we had found a keyboard and I had delivered it to the family.

It's amazing what we in the affluent West have lying around our houses but never use – and which usually ends up on the rubbish tip. Time to share some of our affluence with people who don't have it?

Alas, that's a generosity of spirit that seems to be sadly lacking in politics this year.

A very happy Diwali, Maulid, Christmas, Hanukkah, New Year, Chūnjié, Tsagaan sar, Têt and Norooz. May your digeridoo make the noises you intend, and may your chili powder contain a negligible level of brick dust.

Paul and Evelyn

¹ Other epithets available on request