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Dear Friends

Well the time has come around yet again to write the annual letter. (We're sticking with the online format for most people – if you got a paper copy, you can choose whether to feel grateful or patronised, it probably means we think you're too old to cope with computerised nonsense.) Last year I think we all decided to write 2020 off as a uniquely awful period in our lives and looked forward to 2021 convinced it had to be a vast improvement, but I am not convinced it has been that much better really.

The lowest point of our year as many of you will know already was the death of Jill's lovely Dad back in March. It wasn't unexpected but still left a gaping hole in our lives. We couldn't give him the massive funeral he deserved because of Covid but there were many old friends who "happened to be passing" as we came out of church so he got a good send off in the end. As is so often the way we enjoyed sharing memories of Derek in the run up to the funeral, although sadly many of the best anecdotes were vetoed on the grounds they might "upset Grandma". And that is why none of the funeral tributes mentioned the fact that he was banned from Aldi's car park because he had driven into their wall too many times, or other details too scurrilous even to mention here.

We seem to have lost a lot of people this year. Some of you may remember that 2016 was the year of the celebrity death – we lost Wogan, Bowie, Victoria Wood. We had no idea then what was just around the corner. 2021 seems to have been, for us at least, a year marked by a series of funerals for friends and family. If you share this sense of loss, we send our love.

Edna is doing really well, although she obviously misses Derek. She doesn't get out much but keeps up an extensive correspondence and loves to receive letters and calls from friends. She has decided at the age of 91 to renounce all healthy food and now lives on a diet of cream cakes, chocolate and milky coffee, into which we try to slip the occasional disguised vegetable. She is looking pretty good on it.

Other than that life has moved slowly on here, gradually opening up in some areas but being stubbornly closed in others. I could see how things were going when we started getting excited emails from work about golf clubs reopening as though that was supposed to make things better. We now seem to have reached a point where mass sporting events are back with a vengeance, but I still can't sing hymns in church without a mask. Forgive me if I feel a bit underwhelmed by "Freedom Day"!

Despite the Covid interruptions, both Ellie and Robert graduated this year but without a proper ceremony. Ellie has a job working for a veterinary practice in Monton and is happily living back in Sale with her boyfriend, Murray. I think she is enjoying the job although she seems to have days when all the animals die for one reason or another. Robert is back home and has been applying for jobs, although he played his cards so close to his chest that we wondered if he was being recruited by MI5. It looked like we would end up with two children licensed to kill in their very different ways. Rob has now in fact got a job working as an analyst for a life sciences company and will be moving to London in January (or at least that is what he is telling us).

Phoebe is still working at Sainsburys but starting to look at other options. She has become union rep which plays to her strengths although it is quite hard work. Toilet roll rationing is no longer a thing, but current shortages of certain products increase her scope to make creative substitutions. For example one shopper who wanted KY Jelly received Deep Heat instead.



We did manage to get away to Scotland in the Autumn, driving round the north coast road before spending a week at the boat house. Jill's highlight was turning a corner and coming face to face with this stag. Mine was Jill deciding not to bring him home.

Little else has changed. Our roll count of domestic animals remains constant, Ruby (bless her) is hanging on despite painkillers for her arthritic hip. The rats are kept under control by our regular rat man Dave, who occasionally pops round with his night vision goggles and his shotgun, but always warns us first in case we ring the police. Shirley Bear still likes to bring us dead things and cuddle me during Zoom meetings, or sneak in Rob's window and snuggle under his duvet. Buzz is still a total tart, going round all the neighbours scrounging for food. Our plans for next year include getting a

couple of donkeys from the Donkey Sanctuary to keep in the field next to the alpacas. This will mean that we are officially known as "Donkey Guardians" and we get a badge to prove it! I intend to put the letters DG after my name on all official correspondence.

The ducks that arrived last year disappeared as quickly and mysteriously as they had come. The trigger for this seemed to be the floating duck island which Jill and Edna bought. This only goes to show that ducks are afraid of commitment, they obviously decided that this relationship was moving too fast and they didn't want to be tied down. So we have an unloved and empty island - a metaphor for post-Brexit Britain if you like.

I am vaguely dissatisfied with the lack of post-lockdown socialising. This time last year my resolution was to get in the car the moment lockdown was over and just visit all the people I hadn't been able to hug for so long. It doesn't seem to have worked like that, people are still cautious, and busy, and sometimes still isolating for one reason or another. 2021 was supposed to be a huge party and it hasn't quite lived up to its hype. I still dream of jumping up and down on a crowded dance floor surrounded by friends singing at the top of their voices. But it had better happen soon, my hips aren't getting any younger.



So I guess the only thing left to look forward to in 2021 before we step optimistically into 2022 is Christmas itself. We've made it to December and we've just got to avoid catching the latest variant. Last year the rules were horribly restrictive, but at least they made a kind of sense: this year we just have to live with that nagging feeling that we ought to be exercising a far greater degree of self-restraint than the ludicrous government advice would demand, and that seems a lot more stressful.

Still, Advent is upon us. The Christmas Lights went up as usual on the last weekend of November (thankfully they weren't banned by Cop26), and it is always fun when my mate Si comes to help me with ladders and stuff even though it took hours and was absolutely freezing. The Carol Service, reduced to an online medley of recordings in 2020, is happening *presentially* and rehearsals have started. And my parents are coming for Christmas Day which will be the first time we have spent that day together for over twenty years. So as long as we stay well and there isn't a global shortage of sprout pickers or delivery drivers there shouldn't be anything else to worry about.

Merry Christmas to all. Hopefully see some of you on that dance floor in 2022!

Love from Stephen, Jill, the kids and the animals.

x x x

