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I am going to disappoint you all – Jon has just been appointed Chief Operating Officer of HSBC in Asia and is still in a state of shock brought on by work. So despite my regular work/family trips to UK, Gibraltar, Spain and China, I get to write The Letter and what you are about to read (or throw out) contains more news, a softer focus photo and fewer jokes than usual. So, starting with the big event of the year – we now have a bank car and a driver! (This is particularly useful because Kate passed her test in May and that was the last we saw of our car.) Jon is suffering growing pains from the sudden onset of adult responsibility but is otherwise well. He is still off the booze because it seems to be helping his arrhythmia so it may turn into a life sentence. I, of course, am drinking for two.

We have been back to the UK together for a number of important occasions this year – notably my mother's 80<sup>th</sup> at Norton. I had meant it as a surprise party for her but she noticed the 50' marquee on her lawn a couple of days before, despite the carefully-positioned potted shrubs. We chose the only day in September when it rained in England (I am being serious) but 80 guests braved the mud to hear Daniel reading an ode to my mother written by Jon and modeled on Kipling. My favourite lines were *"If you can weed and not be tired of weeding/Or rule that tonic must not swamp the gin/Or feed small boys until they tire of feeding/Provide loud toys and put up with the din . . . then you will be a Gan Gan."*

I also made several visits to complete the sale of the Old Bakehouse and the ending of an era – the sadness of the loss was somewhat ameliorated by the fact that we know the purchasers and they will cherish the house and garden in their turn. We still have the London flat for visits by us and by friends too.

We were back for Kate's Leavers' Ball in July – she was barely standing after a week "recovering" from A Levels with her friends on some Greek island called Shagalass – and to see Daniel as Pharaoh in 'Joseph'. His Elvis impersonation (from his white bell-bottoms, open shirt, rhinestone belt and long sideburns phase) stole the show. He also walked the boards last month (or charged about them) as the fencing master in a Moliere production – less singing, more fighting. His rugby also involves lots of fighting or barging into people because he is a forward and that is what they do. He loves it, as does Sam. One of them is a tighthead and the other a loosehead prop but I will leave you to work out the significance of that. I have no idea. I just jump up and down on the touchline shouting "Stay back! You'll get hurt!" Less frighteningly, Sam has also developed a flare for wake-boarding which is similar to his great passion, snowboarding, but on water behind a motorboat. He has also got rather good at golf and only missed a hole in one on the third of the Old Course at Fanling by about a foot (I have no idea what that means but it impresses other golfers). Whether it will help him pass his common entrance exam and join Daniel at Rugby School in 2007, I doubt.

We started the year with an enormous flurry of activity in New Zealand where I became completely exhausted putting on and taking off wet suits for various terrifying activities. I never got used to the level of danger I was expected enthusiastically to embrace: we signed on to go blackwater rafting – "Float on tubes through underwater caverns lit by hundreds of glowworms" which turned out to involve throwing yourself off a cliff backwards in pitch darkness into a freezing, raging river while clutching a tube to your bottom in the hope of landing in it and being caught by the previous idiot before being swept helplessly downstream. Then it was swimming with dolphins – "Interact with these beautiful creatures in their natural environment" which did not mean standing in the shallows while they came and chirruped sweetly at you but instead meant sitting on the back of a speed boat with legs dangling in the sea, clinging on desperately while the boat

chased after a pod of dolphins, then being pushed off the boat into the sea to swim in frenzied circles so as to attract a dolphin, which would then swim round and round you very fast to make you drown from dizziness before the boat claxon sounded and you had to thrash back on board the boat and shoot off after the disappearing dolphins. (It did work though: the dolphins came up very close and laughed at us.) Next came whitewater rafting – no problem at all going on a level 5 river when we had only been once before but just to be sure, your guide pushed you in the river and left you to make your own way back into the raft some way downstream. If you succeeded, off you went down 26 rapids in 32 kms. of raging river and complete terror and exhaustion till the end of it – if you stop paddling you die. We had a guide, Derek, who steered – unlike the other raft who lost theirs when he unfortunately hit a rock and fell out of the raft. As we approached each rapid, Derek would yell “If you fall out, swim to the left or stay in the middle but whatever you do, don’t swim right” but the vital instruction changed every time so you couldn’t remember whether it was absolutely don’t swim right - or absolutely not left – or stay in the middle and your chances of swimming between the rocks seemed very remote so it just added to the tension, particularly when he yelled “Oh Shit!”, which was the signal for us to dive to safety in the bottom of the raft. So when it came to bungy jumping I knew to say no. Sam and I took the video while Jon, Kate and Dan jumped headfirst into a river (it’s most fun, apparently, if you just get dunked up to your nose.) What a wonderful country!

We also went to Oman for a week which was less exhausting, very beautiful and often bumpy in the many places where we mistook the desert for the road. We saw turtles clambering out of the sea to lay their eggs, empty beaches (most of them are empty because the roads to them are very bumpy), beautiful mosques, luscious wadis, spectacular mountains and canyons and interesting old forts – and happily some old friends.

In May I took the boys to Barcelona to give Daniel’s Spanish a boost but discovered that they speak Catalan not Spanish most of the time. Fortunately, they also speak English. They had a very nice beach in the town which I don’t remember from our last visit 10 years ago and they still haven’t finished building the cathedral.

Jon in turn took Kate off to Japan for a father-daughter bonding session but her attempts to please her father and try the sushi ended in such a gastro-enterinal disaster that Jon had to call the doctor. I don’t know how she is going to eat on her GAP year travels – any new food (and quite a lot of old food, like pasta) seems to make her ill. She should be alright eating steak and chips in Whistler for the ski season where she has just gone off to be a ski instructor. I do hope the thrill of the blue and yellow uniform does not begin to fade after she has schlepped back up the hill to pick up the 50<sup>th</sup> small child upside down in the snow. However, it will keep her warm - it is -25°C there today so we are all looking forward to a white but very cold Christmas together en famille in Whistler.

After Whistler she is off to Mexico to do a TEFL course and teach local people how to extort money from tourists in Cancun more effectively, before touring South America for 2 months. I hope she will be traveling with her boyfriend, who is planning to meet up with her for the trip – having a 6’4” man at your side should help (though Jon was always more of a liability). We trust that Kate will return from her travels ready to start at Edinburgh University in September. She left school last summer trailing clouds of A grades so had any number of university offers and decided Edinburgh was the party place of choice. Jon is delighted and will be visiting her often with only his golf clubs to give away his real motives. I was actually looking forward to visiting Sydney which is less dark and wet so Kate has promised to go there for her third year.

Daisy (14) is creaky and stone deaf but happy to forage round our big garden – she has a fondness for the local nuts considered edible only by Labradors. Jess (5) is as bouncy as ever and prone to jump off the path into the thickest undergrowth in pursuit of wild cats, civets and snakes. The horses are still happily living the perfect equine existence in rural Northants where Percy is taking his toll on the Krarups’ reforestation project yet still they take me on wonderful rides. I also often hack out with friends here past the vegetable farms, rusting cars, migrating birds and container parks of the New Territories, to the water buffalo and back.

Before I end, I should mention our recent acquisition of a tiny flat in Old Bailey Street, Soho which is now ready to be let. It looks out over the Central police station and former prison – great neighbourhood. It is über cool and the perfect base for us in Hong Kong when Jon retires – it even has a Jacuzzi on the roof terrace. Kate is eyeing it but Jon and I will keep it for ourselves – until we are too old to walk up 5 flights of stairs which at this rate will be quite soon.

