

**Addis Christmas Letter
2005**

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As I write I pause, disturbingly frequently, to stare out of the window at one of the world's great views. Address above left has revealed itself as a real winner, at least at the moment. The lights of Hong Kong sparkle at the base of the Peak, framing the harbour's constant activity. The only problem is that this is a temporary phenomenon. We are about to enter situation normal, which is broadly similar to living on the inside of an envelope. I haven't lived in many places where the landlord recommends closing the windows to keep the clouds out. On the plus side, I have perfected the art of growing mushrooms on the balcony furniture. All this hasn't stopped Corky beautifying the place. We recently took delivery of the piece de la resistance; magnificent claret lampshades in the hall. "What do you think?" she enquired. "I'm not sure. Are we aiming at Amsterdam brothel or submarine control room?" I replied wittily. This, of course, resulted in several hours standing on a chair with my hands above my head, in constant fear of electrocution; a sort of domestic Abu Ghraib. Anyway, they're changed now and it all looks great. We still have the two UK pads, as well, despite valiant attempts to sell the Old Bakehouse. As I should have foreseen, the sale process has resulted in surveys and with houses like the OB, surveys tend to be a tad on the scary side and are best avoided. Prospective purchasers even objected to our charmingly inclined chimney, a key sales hook in my view, on the feeble grounds that it was the result of an end wall being pulled away from the house by electric and telephone cables. Wimps. They don't deserve the place. How can walls with no foundations be expected to remain perpendicular all the time? Let's get real, guys!

The whole list of addresses is given on the basis that you are as likely to catch Corky in England as in HK. There are occasional visits to make sure that the dogs are alright and to ensure that I don't spend my life in bachelorian squalor and these are admittedly becoming more frequent. She has extricated herself from full time employment with Lawrence Graham and has set up her own consultancy company in Hong Kong. I have the sneaking feeling that this is for tax reasons rather than because I am here but daren't ask. She has some interesting clients, who do deals in exotic locations like Beijing, Gibraltar and Dublin so the air miles are racking up nicely. She is really enjoying it and I think she has found her true calling. Riding is now mainly confined to the UK, following a rather nasty and precipitous bringing

together of hard Hong Kong paddock with soft, Carolingian bum over the summer. The technicolour effects were magnificent. What blacks! Such purples! The photo has been vetoed, though, so here's a more boring one.



As for me, I am enjoying being back in Hong Kong despite having used the months I spend alone to take up golf and thus abandoned myself to the life of hopelessness and misery that those of you who play the blasted game will know all too well. It's not unlike my day job in Internal Audit, though there I am on the giving rather than receiving end of the h and m dispersal. Actually, Internal Audit suits me really rather well. I have a licence to take firm views on things on the basis of limited or no evidence and this really plays to my "strengths". Also at the deep end of Kate's "sad" scale, I now commit Welsh

Male Voice Choristing during the hours of darkness. Unfortunately, I can't really throw myself into the grown up choirboy lifestyle because my heart's lack of rhythm has resulted in a year's enforced total abstinence from alcohol.

Worry not. I've been drink free long enough now for it not to bother me. How long? Oh, I don't know. About 3,768 hours, I suppose, give or take.

Speaking of Kate, she is doing well at Rugby, though the move from the Cheltenham Ladies College A grade production facility resulted in whisperings of a B in an AS level last summer. I'm not sure which one because I wasn't allowed to view the certificates on the basis that "everyone retakes all their AS's anyway". "And 'everyone's' Dad pays for them", I muttered darkly. She is more encouraged to work hard since a visit to Sydney last summer convinced her that was the place to go to University. It's a bit close to her family but there isn't a suitable college at the Amundsen-Scott South Pole station, apparently. She had a great summer, including attending a Global Young Leader Conference in the US. She met students from all over the world and spoke in debates in the hallowed halls of the UN and US Congress. The US Immigration Service by whom she was strip-searched twice and forced to redo her entry form three times didn't rate quite so highly. We presume that they will have recommended the "Addis Death Stare" to the Pentagon for further research by now. She also completed her ski instructing qualification while we were in Whistler at Easter but inevitably is now planning not to use that and instead spend her gap year preparing for her current degree favourite, Social Anthropology. She even tried to convince us to go on a family holiday to a Sri Lankan village to help build huts and was not impressed by Corky's suggestion that we could make everyone happy by keeping out of the Sri Lankan's hair, sending them a cheque and going to lie on a beach somewhere.

The boys meanwhile flourish in the uncomplicated way of boys. This term witnesses the total domination of rugby in their lives. They both play prop and seem to be making a good fist of it, which is unfortunate for those of us who believe that every move away from the sweaty clinch of the front row is a step from darkness into light but they seem happy enough. Sam played at wing three quarter the other day and found it a bit dull as he is only really happy when trundling slowly forward festooned with opponents. When pressed, they will also admit to other interests, though mainly sporting, particularly cricket and rowing in the summer. The music is going well, with Daniel about to take his grade 4 Cello and invited (no less) to join the choir. He also played Achilles in the school's performance of Troy and all agreed that Brad Pitt could have learned a thing or two in the manic roaring department. Sam secured a merit in his grade 3 drumming, a feat which occasioned his over-excited, or time-difference-unaware, teacher to kindly ring us at 3am to give us the breaking news. We were unable to gush.

We've had a few fun trips this year, especially Kate who has been twice around the world, more or less, but have really been saving up holiday for a trip to New Zealand over Christmas. Corky and I had a long weekend in Cambodia to visit Angkor Wat. That really is very special. The haunted, liana-draped ruins make it feel as if you've stepped straight into King Louie's palace in the Jungle Book. You can wander about at will, slipping on loose rubble at great heights, with nary a rope to hold you back from a crushing fall to the jungle floor. Get there soon. Between botched restoration attempts, souvenir hunters and the original builders' rather critical failure to invent the arch keystone it is collapsing and disappearing at quite a rate. We also took the kids to Hanoi to see Ho Chi Minh's embalmed body and to practice jaywalking. I am pleased to report that Uncle Ho is looking remarkably well, under the circumstances, and Daniel has learned to grit his teeth, stare straight ahead, walk steadily and let the motorbikes miss him. Actually, Hanoi is a lovely place, though noisier and dirtier than our last visit, now that motorbikes have replaced bicycles. It has an atmosphere of another age, summed up for me by the discovery at the Hanoi airport bookstall, on our way to Angkor, of Edmund Spencer's 16th century bodice ripper "The Faerie Queen" as one of 10 or so English language "best sellers". Quite remarkably, 4 months later it was still there. Look it up if you are passing by and have a thumb through for me.

What of the animals? Daisy and Jess have moved to Hong Kong, a remarkably trouble free manoeuvre, except for having to prove them free of mad cow disease before export, and they seem to quite enjoy it. Corky accuses me of starving or overfeeding them during alternate trips away but generally they are fine. Percy has moved near to Rugby as a guest of our bepaddocked and generous friends the Krarups. Vivien remains near Uffington in pampered luxury. Sarah had to go, I'm afraid, three month stretches without food being beyond even her considerable ability, but she landed on her feet when her new owner produced another bearded lizard that quite possibly may be male. We have received photos of eggs and await news of the clatter of tiny claws.

Here's wishing you all a very Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year.

