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What! No Christmas letter from the Walkers I heard you say! Yes, it's true, due to prolonged idleness I did not get round to it. Sorreeeeee!!!!

Anyway, prompted by two phonecalls (worrying if I had passed away) and at least six written requests I am sending you an early Spring letter to cheer you up. (Actually, looking out of the window its me who needs cheering up – cats and dogs would not do it justice, it's p....ssing down!).

My first sabbatical year has been bliss. No, I am not retired but I am not chained to the trains or the London office and work as and when I please. This meant I have been able to do all sorts of things I had promised myself I would try and do. Improve Meg's website, go and look at www.postnatalexercise.co.uk if you want to see proof, and flog Mum's house to give a couple of examples.

Sorting out my mother's house has been a major step forward. After numerous false starts with various timewasters, it finally sold in the week before Christmas. Exchanged and completed on the same day and sold to some pleasant people. The key to success was to ignore the agents' advice entirely. So we sold it on its own (without my sister's attached cottage), without a drive – they have to park in the road, and with a reduced garden (we gave Louise a much better garden) and we then increased the price. The agents said it would never sell like this and of course it sold almost immediately. The only reason I am going on about it is because it is a saga that dragged on for two and half years and during that time I had been shelling out for Mum's retirement home, which cost me an arm and a leg!

In between times we did get to London for Jan Slee/Logan's wedding bash to David Austin. We were delighted they have hitched the knot or whatever you call it. Sam still treasures the cartoon David did of him in a tank shooting at clay pigeons. The picture is yours truly with the world famous Andrew Logan and one Aggie Elsdon – who is as funny and witty as ever.



This years project is to 'sort out Redcliffe Square'. This is our flat in London and I'll let you know how it goes next year.

By now, your eyes may have glazed over with boredom so we now come to the part of the letter where I write about **SEX**. Only joking, that's just to encourage you to read on.

Of course, sex is really the children's domain, although to call them children is now completely inappropriate. They seem to have all left their virginity behind them and emerged from the growing up process relatively unscathed. Tom has had a succession of girlfriends whom he has reduced to varying degrees of hysteria. Jessie has had a succession of boy friends, car mechanics being a particularly popular line, but these have all been discarded in favour of a fancy free life in the Alps as a chalet girl for six months. Sam spends most of his free time (when he is not playing the guitar) either on the phone or with his current flame, Emma. Meg and I have now got to the stage where we cannot remember whether we have had sex or not. But, that's life I guess.

Tom is now a strapping 22 year old. He has got his diploma in Business Studies but my impression is he really finds business excruciatingly boring. His latest idea is to join the army as a 'squaddie' (he has made periodic attempts to join the army as an officer over the years) but this time did not pass the medical because he was 'too fat'. As Tom is pretty scrawny and superfit (certainly compared with Sam whose idea of exercise is opening a packet of crisps) it has amused everybody. Tom did point out to the examining MO that he was looking at the graph upside down. The response was 'Well, you're still too fat.' So Tom is now signing on at the local leisure centre for some weight training and will then do his OCB and we'll see what happens.

Jessie, when she returns, from being a chalet girl, will go to Oxford Brookes to train as an occupational therapist. I told her that she was only doing occupational therapy so that she could see a lot of motorcycle mechanics in bed with their legs in plaster but she was not amused.

Sam's enthusiasm for the guitar remains unabated. He has now played a number of live 'gigs'. I had assumed a gig was somewhere people went to listen to a band play. Apparently not. You go to a gig to 'get completely shitfaced and then do some mosshing'. Mosshing is jumping around and banging your head into your neighbour's until you feel dizzy or throw up. It is hard to imagine anything more mindless and unpleasant but Sam's skull has always been pretty tough and he has a very strong stomach so does not seem to come to much harm from these activities. He is also a seriously good guitar player.

What have Meg and I been up to you ask? Well, we had some great holidays, Crete with friends, skiing in Tignes, again with friends, and, of course, I have crammed in loads of shooting. Grouse shooting in August and pheasant and partridge shooting over the Autumn and Winter. I cannot really explain the excitement and enjoyment of shooting to those of you who do not like it. But I love it and convince myself that it is sort of organic and natural, and that the birds have a much better existence than the average supermarket hen.



Meg has been working incredibly hard, mainly semi voluntary work, but her special venture, the Guild of Postnatal Exercise Teachers, relies very heavily on her efforts to keep it going, the website will tell you about it if you want to know more. The bad news is that her sister, Juliet, has been diagnosed with mesothelioma – asbestos induced cancer – which has affected her heart and lungs and is inoperable. How she got asbestos cancer is a mystery but she is bearing up well, partly helped by refusing to have chemotherapy because, as it is not effective for this type of cancer, she could see no point in it and so has avoided all the horrid side effects. The picture shows Juliet on the left, Sally, Tony (brother in law) and Meg.

Changing the subject, one of our greatest excitements this year was the birth of our nine daughters and two sons. Yes, Rambo the ram did his stuff and the five ewes we were given (about a week before the the foot and mouth outbreak) produced four twins and one set of triplets. One of the lambs was sickly and soon died but the others thrived, so we now have ten ewes and, of course, Rambo looking very pleased with himself. We also have a very full freezer, just in case you think I am getting soft and romantic. We also have the neatest and tidiest fields in the area and we were very lucky, foot and mouth missed us by about a mile, literally.

Other excitements included our usual annual pilgrimage to the New Forest to go camping with all the cousins. As usual, I cooked chicken korma, mushroom bhaji etc for 70 plus people on the Saturday night and vast quantities of beer were consumed. I suspect the whole event contributed more to global warming than all the power stations in Siberia put together. You can see Meg and Jessie glowing with health with one of the picnics they have prepared.

Our only real failure this year is to travel round and see more of you all. We did love seeing people at the Summer 30th wedding anniversary do. Amazing that so many travelled to come and see us. We loved it and have some great photos to remember it by.

Anyway, we promise we shall try harder this year and hope to catch up with some of you that we have not seen for ages. Do write, or email if you can – email is proving a good way to keep in touch but my computer has developed a mind of its own and delights in torturing me by randomly throwing peoples addresses away without trace – so if all else fails, give us a ring! We wish you the very best for 2002.



Love