

Friday, the Thirteenth

Dear Diary,

6a.m. Alarm bell shatters sleep. Rain drizzling down on skylight.
Dogs in no mood to get up; neither am I.

6.45. Hoist self up and then down to kitchen where complete first morning ritual of putting on kettle for tea. Real tea, none of that tea-bag nonsense. Let dogs out in yard. Some slip through gate and are away down the track in a jiffy.

Move on to second ritual. Run bath.

Just enjoying a potful of heavenly Darjeeling winged direct from London when peace of morning crumbles. Puce-faced farmer is mouthing a torrent of abuse over gate. The words are not what I was taught in Japanese classes but get the gist of what he is shouting. 'Four dogs have run amok in his paddy' – a criminal offence in this neck of the woods, as crop is now ready to harvest. Mouth apologies back as Gang of Four slink back in.

Soak in hot tub and contemplate my declining popularity in the neighbourhood.

Out by 7.20 as must be dressed and alert for third morning ritual: BBC News courtesy NHK satellite. Within 30 minutes have learnt that the rest of the world is still there and that Nose is after all a better place to be than Beirut, Baghdad, Belfast or Zagreb.

8 onwards. Walk stray dogs, boarding dogs, assorted dogs, either singly (when they're likely to tear one another to pieces) or in groups (when they more or less get along). Up the mountain as have to avoid paddies at all costs.

9.30. Regular help arrives to feed and clean dogs and cats. Am beginning to feel somewhat peckish with all this fresh air and exercise. Perk up pot of espresso as prelude to breakfast.

Screams from helper. Our main freezer has thawed overnight (someone left the door ajar and/or cats have prised it open). Contents now oozing out: bread crusts and dried sardines (we had a donation of 200kg recently which has contributed to the strain on our refrigeration system) in a blend of Haagen Dazs Swiss Almond Chocolate and tomato puree. Shut door on mess – mind now on eating, not cleaning up.

Dogs barking like a pack of hyenas. Visitor. Housewife-type standing at gate beneath floral umbrella. Weigh up if she's a potential Bible-basher and about to waste my time or someone with an animal problem. The risk seems evenly spread. Take a gamble and let her in. Offer coffee as am dying for a cup myself. Turns out she has a daughter problem – daughter refuses to go to school – wants my advice. She has timed her visit badly as am now famished but listen patiently for 30 minutes wondering what on earth all this has to do with me. Finally see her off, problem unsolved.

10.15. At least have had a cup of coffee but still craving sustenance of some kind. Truck drives up. Damn. I had forgotten that yesterday I asked the builder to call – want to ask him why office building still a shell six months after it was started. Yesterday had a good argument prepared – now famished state reduces my ability to get angry. Find myself sympathizing with his problems, anything to get rid of the fellow.

Repair to house and start frying up bumper breakfast. Phone rings. (Naturally, people assume 11a.m. is a reasonable time to call, normal folks having had their breakfast hours ago.) Stray dog I boarded two days ago has eaten its way out of wire enclosure at their place and is now lost.

11.15 Finally get 10 uninterrupted minutes in which to consume what might be (at the rate things are going) my only meal of the day.

Take pony and goats out of stable down track towards their field, drizzle having abated somewhat. This is a hazardous journey as rice fields

lie right beside the path, heavy ears of rice leaning temptingly within mouth-reach of seven hungry herbivores. A moment's hesitation and all will be lost, and I'll have to start searching for a new home. Speed up procession to a gallop and bolt gate on them with feeling of relief.

Chores continue their mundane pattern. Mucking out stable, washing chewed-up animal blankets, preparing tomorrow's kennel food, washing up (not just my breakfast plate but several dozen dog dishes as well). Helper faithfully keeps to Japanese mealtime schedule and digs into her o-bento so realise noon has already passed.

Postman arrives. Normally an exciting event but today he brings a letter which I myself posted 24 hours before – ¥50 under-stamped. Hurtle down to village post office in fury. Someone has blundered as had same letter weighed and stamped at same PO yesterday. Staff in unison bow and disappear behind nervous giggles. It's not the ¥50 I begrudge, it's the waste of time.

Await bright spot of day, a visit by BBC Radio 4 who are coming to interview me for a programme they're doing on eccentric Brits engaging in odd things in far-flung places (I guess I qualify as well as anyone). Promised to be here at 1.30 but still no sign of them. One hour later a yellow Kyoto taxi breaches the horizon. The driver got lost soon after Ni-jo and had been combing the countryside for hours in search of Nose. Only in Japan a week, the team are craving a decent cup of tea. Have come to right place. Lack proper refreshment though, cupboard is bare. Miracle appears however in form of lady with cat, carrying box of cream eclairs. Eclairs instantly devoured by hungry Brits while lady disappears in Mercedes leaving cat behind for boarding.

Notice during out walkabout that several camellia trees have become deciduous, skeletons in fact. Notice too what is causing this phenomenon – armies of grey caterpillars pillaging the leaves. Once BBC have entrained at the nearest station, rush home and soak bits of cloth in

paraffin, tie to bamboo stick and set off round garden with flaming torch. Not exactly humane but the only effective way I know to save the trees.

Darkness falls. Now all the people who've been trying to get me while I was out of earshot start to call. Among the calls is one from a lady with 28 cats who is suffering from neighbour complaints (understandably). Prefer to leave problem in her court rather than bring it into mine.

11.00. Retire with Mildred Cable's *Gobi Desert*. Reckon my problems are minimal compared with hers. Only have three canines to dislodge before getting into bed. She had camels to contend with.

Elizabeth Oliver