

Dear Friends

2006 has been a momentous year for us with the coming of our daughter Nakira. Just back from our New Year's holiday at Inverloch, we went a week later to our last "before-natal" class – this was the big one called "Labour and Birth" - no, this was not a Kim Beazley's answer to John Howard's \$3 000-a-pop-repopulate-with-WASPs-or-be-taken-over-by-foreigners – this was the full on description of everything that might happen throughout the birthing process, replete with descriptions of "interventions" that might be made on the half-anaesthetised, wholly exhausted mother ("interventions" code for: slash and cut Mama with murderous-looking medical instruments to make the transit lounge a little roomier for little one's big journey) and real, live examples of giant tweezers (known in the birthing trade as forceps) and their supposedly milder alternative – a suction cap attachable to your little stuck bairn's head so that they could be yanked into the dry world by their scalp, leaving your little one with a week-lasting haemorrhage and a countenance straight from that god-awful early nineties movie about the family with the pointed heads – you know, the kind of head you might fancy an archbishop or KKK member would have under their pointy hats. Since most of the mums at the class were no further into their pregnancies than 34 weeks, no-one there really believed this was going to happen to them yet. No-one aside from the one poor lady who was 38 weeks, about to drop her bundle anytime and who was exuding fear almost in the solid state and whose first question was, "can one have a voluntary Caesarian?". My question to the nurse taking the class blithely dispensing all this information was, "have you been through this yourself?", to which the answer was, "no, but I've been present at hundreds of births", which in turn provoked a further question from none other than Age columnist Sushi Das, who was one of the mums, "Is that why you've never been through this!?". Sushi Das, by the way, is her real name and always has been: some years ago I was aware of her name as I flicked through the pages of "The Age", but had never actually read anything by her, and so I assumed she was a restaurant critic or food columnist who had taken a kind of stage name.

Two hours after the "Labour and Birth" class, we woke with our bed flooded as little Nakira had announced in no uncertain terms that she was on the way. Not ever having taken horoscopes at all seriously, I was amused to find my first reaction was one of irritation that Nakira would not be born a Piscean like Mindal and I are. Her foreseen due date was the 12th of March, a day before Mindal's birthday and six days after mine, so that would have been rather grand. However, when we got to the hospital, no cramps, nothing. Maybe Nakira had smelt John Howard in the air and decided against coming out after all. So Mindal was to stay in hospital – with her waters broken but no birthing happening there was a risk of infection and Nakira would be induced at 36 weeks. So we just thought Mindal would have to sit tight for a few weeks in hospital as she had done twice already throughout her pregnancy. At least we were in the hospital. One poor woman in Mindal's (and my, since I am looking after Nakira two days a week) mother's group began labour several (I think the figure was no fewer than four) days before the hospital would admit her. They were "only" Braxton-Hicks contractions, but Rose still winces and screws up her face involuntarily when she tells this tale.

I casually spent Australia Day buying baby clothes and things that we would now need a few weeks before we thought we would, but still a few weeks from that point in time, or so we thought! Australia Day evening saw in a freakish tornado that tore down many of the trees in our neighbourhood and flattened many cars but thankfully hurt no one. I spent a casual evening with Mindal showing her new baby things and photos of the tornado's aftermath – here we were thinking that this was just day two of a several week wait and that we still had time to organise the many things we had not begun to think about, even by then. However, that night, Nakira decided that it was too bad out there to hide from John Howard and she had to come out and set things straight. After a labour that began at 3am and lasted until 1pm the next day, she was here, and so thankfully was Mindal in one piece. We had our friend Karen help us during the birth and, since she already had a daughter from a year beforehand, was a great comfort to us all. Nakira had withstood a pregnancy that was likely as traumatic for her as it was Mindal – and lived, so she was meant to be. From then onwards, Nakira was deciding when the next stage would be. Admitted to the special care nursery for four weeks, we assumed we'd have some more time to make ready at home. However, Nakira discovered the knack of bothering the nursing staff by pulling out her feeding tube repeatedly. Since she was taking precociously well to the bottle, she was sent home after a week and a half.

Incidentally, the name "Nakira" took much discussion between Mindal and me to come up with. We hadn't really gotten it decided owing to Nakira's early coming, however, it was on the shortlist. Nakira is a local aboriginal word meaning "seeing" or "foresightful"; the other alternative was "Kulinia", which is a West Australian word meaning firestick. I thought that would be a grand name for a daughter – the firestick borne to the next "camp" to carry on the next generation. However, a couple of

people thought it might be battered into “Chlamydia” when Nakira was at school, so we settled on Nakira. She ended up with five names: Nakira Rewthe Kulinia Merrindal Routley. We chose Routley because my Vance cousins are breeding as we speak and so there will still be more Vances thirty years hence than you can poke a stick at, but it looks very like Nakira will be the only Routley child. Nakira and Kulinia you already know about, and of course Merrindal is her illustrious and luscious Mama – Rewthe was Chaucer’s spelling of “Ruth” as in “Compassion”, not the Hebrew name “Ruth” (also a pretty name meaning “friend”). I dreamt I would like to call my daughter a name meaning compassion, so it had to get a shoe-in at the last minute and we chose Chaucer’s spelling to distinguish it from the usual Ruth. Hey, at least it’s reasonably phonetic – Mindal’s mum chides that we can’t spell Ruth – the original spelling of the English ruth was from the Old English and Norse words whence it comes, namely Hrygðe, Hrygth, Hréow, which would be unrecognisable! Interestingly, notwithstanding their foreign looking spellings, they were actually pretty alike in sound to "ruth" or "rutha" - these old words have most likely barely changed in meaning and sound for nigh two thousand years.

When Nakira came home, she flattened us. She needed feeding every two hours and threw up most of what we gave her. I had taken two months’ leave from work to help care for her and both Mindal and I were working probably around 18 hours a day. Mindal was trying to get Nakira onto the breast, a feat we have since learnt is very seldom pulled off with a bub who has been fed through a gavage tube. The breastfeeding Nazis (aka the Breastfeeding Association) never told us that. Mindal had to express milk six times a day, then feed it to our poor little daughter. The feeding took about an hour and a half, just in time to put Nakira to bed and for Mindal to begin expressing again. We staggered on for about four weeks, until Mindal had the good sense to check us into a Mother-Baby care unit. I wouldn’t have thought of it – notwithstanding the hardship, it wasn’t really anything different from what I had foreseen and anticipated, after all - it is almost proverbial in our culture how hard the first three months with a baby can be – and so I had no sense of there being an easier way. That stay made a huge difference for us – we had stacks of help learning how to settle our little one and were almost back to normal sleeping patterns by the time Nakira and Mindal left the Albert road clinic. Raising our daughter in now positively fun. She has just begun commando crawling and investigates everything. Her greatest joys are new people and places and her favourite things are taps – they are shiny and they spit out water – at least for the time being – and Nakira is thoroughly fascinated by running water. She loves going out in her sling – she sits on our chests looking outwards and is eating like a hay-baling machine - hopefully that means that she will like her food as much as Mindal and I do and that we’ll be able to share that pleasure with her. We have an eating song that we do with her - it was a rhyme in the ABC Playschool’s “Very Useful Book” and we set it to a tune that is somewhat like Minnie the Moocher:

I’m a big fierce lion with a hungry maw (pat Nakira’s tum at this point)
And I prowl around on four soft paws (hold Nakira horizontal and move her arms like front paws padding)
With a swish of my tail (Swing Nakira’s backside to the side)
And a swipe of my claws (make striking motion with Nakira’s hand)
I’m looking for something to munch with my jaws! (Put Nakira in her rocker and give her the first spoonful. Usually she will be looking like the entrance to Luna Park at this point with her jaws agape!)

There are songs and rhymes we make up for little Bairn’s toys and situations. Well, she seems to like them anyway. We hope you can meet her soon if you haven’t already.

Mindal was off a further four months looking after little Bairn – (she has several nicknames – Madame le Petit Four is another – because she is like a little oven when she sleeps on your lap. If she and Zeus climb on at once, you almost expire of heat exhaustion ...). During that time Mindal kept going to a day version of the Albert Road clinic. I worked fulltime for four months to bring in some dosh, which we promptly spent on a holiday in Broome and at Falls Creek and then, in September, I began working three days a week. Mindal and I now both work three days, and look after Nakira for two. On Fridays, when we both work, we have a “third parent”, a childcare worker friend of ours called Rachael and whom Nakira absolutely adores (I suspect Rachael is a little more fun than us for our cheeky little daughter).

I entered the Birkebeiner ski race at Falls Creek in August but was slammed into by a giant Norwegian hammering past – he must have been about two and a half metres tall and the collision rather reminded me of those momentum experiments in high school where the big ball bearing comes lumbering along and bumps into another little one, barely feeling the collision that sends the little one flying across the

whole room. This giant fellow, clearly an elite skier, shot a polite but terse “Udskuld” at me before vanishing within half a second. Like the big ball in the momentum experiment analogy, I doubt whether he had a true understanding of just how hard he had hit, but I saw stars and then crashed into someone who had fallen over before me, giving my knee a rather nasty twist in the process. Up until then, however, we had had a great week in CSIR lodge with our friends Glenn and Meg. The snow was a little on the patchy side, but there was still enough to have a good cross country ski.

Mindal’s mum was sadly diagnosed with lung cancer – a secondary from the tumour she had removed from her breast four years ago – and is not foreseen to live a great deal longer. It’s rather a shame as she has anticipated little Nakira’s coming for some time so it is sad she won’t be around for more of Nakira’s life. Naturally the situation is highly stressful for Mindal: just when we thought we were getting to grips with Nakira, another challenge arises!

Our little cat Freyja also had a tumour removed recently, but thankfully it turned out to be benign. We’re all very fond of our little cat, who really has been in the wars throughout her life, with first her broken incisor tooth necessitating a root-canal, then her car accident which saw her on death’s door for six weeks, several bad bladder infections and lastly a mastectomy that leaves her with five of her original eight nipples. She still doesn’t get along with our big beautiful furry boy Zeus. Zeus is clearly enjoying life and clearly king of his domain.

Work has been fun and really interesting. We have just begun a big project to get some crowd in the US to build one of our more advanced lens designs, which are my own so I’m rather excited about it all. I have been lumbered with the task of Laser Safety Officer, which means I spend a great deal of time telling people stuff they don’t want to hear. So far it’s OK, but continual battles with people to make them do the right thing is getting a little bothersome. On another front, I have published a couple of big papers with my friend François Ladouceur on a quantum electrodynamic model of our confocal microscope. OK, that’s not much excitement to most of you – sorry to keep you up – stop yawning there – but for me this work really gets the nerd juices flowing. If you’re needing a cure for insomnia, perhaps I’ll send you round a copy of parts one and two (and three when it hopefully is published in the New Year) of “One-photon electrodynamic in fibre / fluorophore systems”!

In closing, thanks for being our friends, have a grand Christmas and wonderful New Year.

Lotsa Love Rod, Merrindal, Nakira, Zeus and Freyja.