

Dear Friends

2009 has been a somewhat quieter year for us than last year. Whilst the legal draughters scorch their pens at Copenhagen, my fingers will try to find some less lofty words to tell you about our life this year.

You're probably all a bit tired of my gushings about Nakira – she's such a big part of our Mindal's and my life that I just can't help it really - so maybe I'll hold myself back and put telling you about her year off till after Mindal and I have had a look in. The big news is that Mindal is with child and about to pop; 37 weeks as of today (13<sup>th</sup> of December). We've found ourselves, not altogether through our own choosing, in the invidious plight of shifting house on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of December, so we earnestly hope the littler bairn stays in the wet world until after then. Just imagine – birthing, shifting house and celebrating Christmas all in one day – I feel a certain superstitious pang even writing those words lest they should make it happen! Mindal does pregnancy rather rough; many of you will know that she gets dreadful morning sickness that drags on throughout all three terms, hence it hasn't been a particularly fun year for her. Unfortunately she quickly became too ill to stay at her paid job, thus sundering her from three days a week contact with the sane world. So, um if you'll be so kind as to wait a minute, I'm just asking Mindal what I can write down for you about how it feels to be living construction site pretty much bedridden with a crazy husband chasing an equally crazy daughter around for company. “Unbelievable frustrating – just the feeling of being such a friggin' invalid!” comes the answer. We'll, she's certainly not invalid to Nakira and me and indeed I think it has been a pretty rough year for Nakira too as she has missed Mindal greatly when we have had to put her in crèche much of the time when I am at work. We're due on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of January, so I hope there are some medical services on if the littler one comes on New Year's Eve.

Our only holiday all together this year was our fortnight beach stay at Inverloch. We had our friends Glenn and Louise and their three month old Chloe as well as Karen, Oz, Charleah and little Dyson stay with us for a few days. Little Chloe, being breastfed, inspired Nakira to run up to me, lift my shirt and leave deep teeth marks on my chest that lasted several days, asking “why does Chloe bite Louise?”. Nakira loved the company and throve on the odd mixture of love, hate roughhouse and screaming that passes for play between a three and a four year old - it all rather reminds me of kittens roughhousing one another: springing into the air and thumping one another on the ground thoroughly enjoying themselves even though some of the blows and bumps look as though they would be far too painful for a grownup to bear. Little Dyson, nine months old and ready to see the world, fearlessly undertook crawling exploration expeditions between the flailing legs and slumping bottoms and somehow lived through it all.

Mindal and I hired an architect early this year to help us design some build-ons for our house – a bigger living area and an upstairs with storage for all the clutter that seems to stick to us modern humans: one doesn't even need to walk out one's front door to be starkly reminded of who is to blame for all of the woes being debated in Denmark at the moment. I have a theory that consumer goods are not the waste product of rampant capitalism but rather that it is the other way around – that computers, greeting cards that sing “jingle bells” thanks to ultraminiaturised electronic technology, cars that tell you which way to turn lest you should have to fire more than two neurons at once, play 37 channel stereo music and spew Nickelodeon begotten anaesthesia (thoroughly overladen with ads spruiking yet more stuff) at your children through inbuilt DVD screens and other such essentials are indeed different subspecies of an extraterrestrial virus invading our Earth which has constructed “business” and “capitalism” just to keep us guessing so that we won't know the truth (shhhhhh! I've just realised that I'm writing this on my computer, so we'd better not let him, her or it know that we could be on to them!). To paraphrase Michael Leunig: there comes a time in your life when all the different plug-in rechargers for your phone, blackberry, shaver and go-anywhere electronic Freudian psychiatrist come to life and line up before you demanding to know, “what *have* you let your life become”!

Anyhow, I digress. Mindal and I engaged Tony the architect who was rather like a benevolent “Cat-in-the-Hat”, because he showed up promising a wonderful game (cunningly disguised as building blueprints) then brought along a big box holding Thing 1 and Thing 2 (aka “Stephen the Builder; Can we trash it?” and his sidekick) inside. When he opened the box, Thing 1 and Thing 2 burst out and went thoroughly feral around the house, seemingly heedless of any plan and indeed denying that there *was* even a plan. Just when Mindal and I were altogether beside ourselves at the heap of utter chaos that was once our home, Tony came back with his many-handed tidying machine assuring us that “I always pick up my playthings” and restored the house to something amazingly and unbelievably like his original plan. In all seriousness, I think the project would have been a shambles without an architect who could manage the wild and wayward lifeform commonly known as a Builder, since, from what I have heard, I don't think Stephen was at all untypical. I've known many scientists and engineers very like him – they are loose cannons who do excellent work but they do what they *think* is needed without asking what actually *is* needed. The first of the bizarrer manifestations of Stephen's waywardness was: after having been asked by Mindal thrice to use a highly particular kind of roof insulation and to get different quotes on the same product he went out and bought whatever was on special down at the local store and had the roof plumber install it, irreversibly nailing the whole roof down on top of it before asking us what we thought of the job. As I have said, Mindal's work in deciding what kind of insulation to use was far from trivial – about two weeks of her time full time and reams of thermodynamic calculations went into researching the issues and she had made it very clear to Stephen and Tony that anything done in the roof needed her review before it went ahead. Another time we showed up at the site to be asked “Come and see where I've put the windows, to see whether you think they are right?” We then told Stephen we couldn't recall exactly what was decided and that therefore he should check what the drawings asked for, he answered, “The windows we're not on the drawings”. This, of course, was hogwash – I can't think of why he would tell us such a thing and I can only think that he just couldn't be bothered referring to the drawings and just said the first thing he thought would get us out of his hair. His crowning achievement was to call the painter in to start painting the inside of the house – WITHOUT first asking us what colours we wanted. We hadn't even decided ourselves, so I am

utterly unaware of what thought process led to his choice - maybe he thought we had beamed our wishes telepathically to him from the future. After having wasted the painter's work for a couple of rooms, he paused to let us decide our colours - Nakira had great fun splodging sample paintpots onto walls to help us make our choices - Mindal chose neutrals downstairs so that we could colour our furniture how we wanted to and I chose a bright yellow upstairs with purple feature walls. I hope I'm not in the grip of a Van Gogh psychosis - I assure you I haven't been abusing foxglove and that you won't be receiving my ear by mail anytime soon. We're all looking forward to shifting back and think that our new abode will be great fun to live in.

Whilst all this was happening, we moved out into a rented house in Blackburn South. After my early experiences as a Uni student renting houses I swore I would never again live in a house with a do-it-yourself landlord: but somehow we forgot to check that detail as we struggled to find a rented pad. And thus we were blessed with Mr. 1800-DIY (name changed to protect the not-so-innocent), who, we believe, most likely makes his living through debt funded ownership of several investment properties and is probably beset by ever-threatening cash flow droughts. In short, he's an utter tightarse who gets around in threadbare gear reminiscent of Uncle Scrooge Mc Duck and drives a beaten up old pickup stuffed full of tools that look like they've been salvaged from a parish trash and treasure fair. In fairness, he does show up fairly promptly to look at problems, but there is no solution if it one can't be gotten from the antique gadget array in the back of his ute. Thank heavens we're leaving before next Winter - we asked for our heater to be serviced as it was snuffing itself out twice a day. We were blessed with the services of Mr. 1800-DIY hacking at delicate gas plumbing with the kinds of tools I haven't seen since I witnessed my grandfather attacking a rusty waterpipe thicker than a T-Rex's aorta with a 20kg monster number sporting an iron crushing clamping chain that, thanks to my grandfather's patient and measured handling, shore the hefty pipe clean in two, sending harbourfulls of high pressure water and an even greater volume of my grandfather's unrepeatable expletives heavenwards. Enough to say we have now switched the heater's gas supply off altogether as our neighbour is a smoker and regularly lights one up in the kitchen right next to the where the said expertly serviced heater sits. I'm sure the heater doesn't leak one little bit! On another occasion, Mr. 1800-DIY showed up, unbidden and unannounced, to poison some treestumps (which weren't bothering us), with kerosene (of course!), leaving us barely able to breathe in the unbearable hydrocarbon stench wafting through the house. Now, I'm not greatly knowledgeable about such things, I'm sure that such use of kerosene is probably not ecologically sound and correct me if I'm wrong, but isn't kerosene made out of dead trees, in a way of speaking? Anyhow that's the only explanation I can think of for what happened next: the hitherto lifeless stumps decided it was wonderful to be reunited with their long dead brothers and sisters and exuberantly threw like the ancient rainforests that created the kerosene in the first place. We now have triffid-like tendrils sprouting wildly in all directions from the formerly dormant, happily minding their own business stumps. I had to laugh when, a few weekends ago, Nakira and I stayed in a rundown hotel on Pott's Point in Sydney. When Nakira was frustrated firstly by a doorhandle coming off in her hand and then by a tap which wouldn't work, she earnestly asked whether Mr. 1800-DIY owned the hotel!

My job at Optiscan amazingly lives on! A project together with Carl Zeiss, a few odd sales and some new capital keeps us going. We're now only 13 staff - a ghost of the 45 strong company we were eighteen months ago and our office space has long since shrunk to the nether floor of the two storey block we used to fill. Our landlord still tries in vain to rent the now revenue-sere space upstairs out. It's slightly surreal as many companies in our neighbourhood have gone to the wall, great swathes of office space sit empty and everything's eerily quiet. I often go walking at lunchtime past the CSIRO crèche, which is teeming with kids of Nakira's age and whom the sight of always lift my mood and then onwards around Monash Uni just to reassure myself that this is not the "Omega Man" set or some kind of after-nuclear-holocaust world. I think the latter would be better than running into Charlton Heston.

Nakira was, as always, a great joy for us this year. Her speech and use of language have grown in leaps and bounds. Not happy with our answers to "what's this called?", she's taken to making her own words up to name the welter of bits of plastic, brackets, odd looking screw-kind-fasteners, surreal components of some new borrowing from the toy library. A typical dialogue: (N) "What's this called?" (R) "Uuuuum, we don't really have a word for that odd shapen bit of plastic joining those two weird thingies, sweetie" (N) "Oh. Are these called weird thingies?" (R) "Not really, they're just things we don't have a word for either" (N) "We need to find one then. What's that called then?" (R) "You know, even though I've nigh tripped over one of those nearly every day for the last forty-five years, somehow I've just blithely taken for given the lack of a name for that, too". (N) big sigh, expressing some frustration "Ohhhhh dear. Do you know the name of any of this stuff then?" (R) "No. You know, Sweetie, even Shakespeare only knew twenty three thousand words and Chaucer only ... I forget how many ... but if they named every bit of stuff on every contraption they came across, they would run out of words quickly" (N) "Who's Sauce-her? Why didn't he just learn more words?..." She thus probes the world with endless questions, which are a wonderful insight into what's going on in that amazing little head of hers. To overcome the limitations of English as grasped by Papa, we now have "Twannel" to name her potty-lid, "Sniggapigga" to name the loop-on-the-end-of-a-stick used for blowing bubbles with. If she hasn't learnt the word for something, she deftly makes one up that is wontedly pretty evocative: "Tummy hole" for belly button, "Unpart" for disassemble "make through" for "fold inside out". Her yellow bath duck has been named "Suggy". One of her favourite things at the moment is a cement mixer truck - the sight of one elicits "Wow, a big mixer, mixing around!", a bright and huge grin and a wobbly little dance, even notwithstanding that she is still strapped into her carseat. Nakira wants to have a fairy party for her next party at the "Mixer Home" (the concrete depot where all the mixer trucks go to fill up). She has a toy mixer from the toy library she has named "Trombo" and it is a sad parting whenever we have to take Trombo back. Trombo rolls up to her doll's house to give all the little characters in Nakira's present story a ride - this involves being spun around inside Trombo's mixing drum - I'm glad the little dolls and toy dinosaurs that act her stories out have strong stomachs or our living room floor would be bedecked in chunder! She has greatly enjoyed watching our house being built onto and she often puts a shifting spanner in Mindal's handbag when we visit the building site saying earnestly "I need to fix the

house – I need to talk to Stephen about it”. Watching her teach herself to draw has been fascinating – wild scribbles suddenly took on a web like structure and we took a while to work out that she was drawing the road maps she loves to look at in the car. After we have worked out how to get to our destination, she asks for the street directory and scrutinises it intensely. “What’s this road? What’s this road?” is asked over and over again as she swiftly amasses a knowledge of all the streets in Melbourne. At home again, she draws intricate maps of where she has been. Slowly, map-drawing gave her the pen-skill to make fabulous creatures take shape from the webby map background and in the last month or two she has drawn a self portrait – recognisably human. She gives names to her creations: my favourites are “A Faraway Land” and “A Funny-Looking Queen Ant”. A little city she builds out of sticks, playdough and plastic picnic forks is known as “Forky Farm”. Nakira’s contemplation of some of the deeper aspects of life are sometimes heart wrenchingly poignant, sometimes sidesplittingly blackly funny. Our neighbour’s (Meg’s) beloved cat Max was killed by a car earlier this year, a happening that began Nakira’s wrestling with the concept of death. One morning I found her singing, to the tune of “A Hunting We Will Go” to a toy cat of hers “He died on the road, he died on the road, he was squashed by a car and he died on the road”. An odd fear of car wrecks (“Broken Cars”) is another way such philosophisings show themselves. A few doors down the road from us in an abandoned house there is an ancient wrecked Ford Anglia (I think), which she has named Bronwyn the Broken Car. She shuts her eyes whenever we pass Bronwyn and asserts that she will fix Bronwyn up when she turns four years old. Many, many things, we are told, are going to happen when she turns four. Everything from swapping places with the pilot so she can fly the plane (as announced when we went to Sydney two weeks ago) to riding to crèche by herself. I’ve two more years with her at home before she goes to school, and I so yearn to freeze time right here and now and watch her living forever!

Anyhow, that’s way too many words from me for one Christmas, so we hope to see you all soon in our new old house! We hope you’ve had a grand 2009 and hope you have a happy 2010.

Lots of Love from Mindal, Nakira, Rod, Zeus and Freyja and a little someone who is still in the wet world, whose name we know but which we’ll keep to ourselves until we next see you!



Weird lifeforms sighted at 54 Main Street on Xmas Day

Xmas Eve – Nakira conducts the Salvation Army band

Who says dishwashing liquid is safe? Beware its teratogenic properties!



At Inverloch with Nakira’s friend Charleah

Nakira’s third birthday

Latest anti parent technology being tested to make ready for teenagehood



Spontaneous teatime art. "This is a clock". Note that there are twelve passionfruit halves



Papa turns 45. I always thought 45 was the speed I played my Neil Diamond singles at. I never believed it would actually quantify my age!



Bathtime is always a fave, once we get there



Afterbath snuggletime



Learning to clean teeth – Papa's that is



Bronwyn the Broken Car



Future Haut Couture Career Planned



You never know who's going to show up for dinner!



Passionfruits are a fave food and costume