

Dear Friends

Another year has slidden by since I last saw, spoke or otherwise corresponded with some of you, so, given the busyness of everyday life, my yearly letter becomes more important than ever (at least for me anyway!). We began our year at a relaxed pace: we shifted back into our newly rebuilt house (now replete with upstairs and a new high-ceilinged living room and painted the colours that we've always wanted to paint) on the 23rd of December, celebrated Christmas on the 25th and went into hospital for the birth of Sascha on the 27th of December. I don't even think I recall the New Year coming in, Mindal and I needed precious little new anything else by that stage!

So the main news is that the last year has seen the coming into the dry world of our son and Nakira's brother Sascha Ngiri Kiran and his first explorations and awarenesses. Mindal, Nakira and I got to feel again the joy of seeing a new little life discovering and finding pleasure in wondering at the everyday things the rest of us all take for granted; as I write this, Sascha is enthralledly poring over a hairbrush and has been for the best part of the last hour, sliding his tiny fingers in between its tynes and ever so precisely rolling his palms onto them with just enough weight from a deftly held wrist to feel the weird pricking from a grid of them at once on his hands, a sensation that elicits a wide-eyed staring at the hairbrush that is clearly the only thing that exists in his world at this moment. In their own right such things are a joy, and they also bring flooding back memories of Nakira's explorations in her first dry year. So far, Sascha's and Nakira's personalities seem remarkably alike, with Sascha perhaps a wincy bit calmer, ever so slightly less mouthy and curious, a little warier but even more social (interested in faces and people) than Nakira was (and you all likely remember what a social little thing she has always been). Such small differences would seem easily accounted for by lack of anxiety of both Mindal and me the second time round as parents, a fact that makes Mindal and me a little sad for Nakira insofar that we still think of that tiny little baby born six weeks early and so much in need of calm love and our own overwhelmedness hindering its flow. However, Nakira, at Sascha's age now, was also a happy baby and seems pretty happy now, and indeed seems to adore her little brother. Sascha was the name that Mindal and I gave him (Alexander on his birth certificate, as I am too much of a pedant to put a diminutive on a birth certificate!) and Ngiri the name Nakira gave him after a character in one of her favourite books (Graeme Base's "Jungle Drums") and is the name she almost exclusively calls him by, thus Sascha-Ngiri kens and answers still to both names. Since Nakira is by far the interestingest person in the house as far as he is concerned, he maybe still answers to "Ngiri" more than "Sascha", so we still don't know what he'll be called by as he grows up. He'll have to choose for himself, which I expect will be fun for him. Sascha has in the last two weeks begun doggedly dragging himself around in the beginnings of a commando-crawl, discovering delights such as hairbrushes, potato-mashers (his favourite toy!), and all the toys and objects strewn in the chaotic wake of Big Sister's almost impossibly intricate stories that take place in scenes built up with figurines, soft toys, plastic animals, model cars, trucks and trains, stones with faces drawn on them, and even kitchen utensils such as Sascha's potato masher temporarily raised into the realm of the Sentient Being as life is breathed into them by Nakira's imagination and they take part in the hefts of conversation that Nakira bestows on her tiny living worlds. As I said above, Sascha LOVES new faces, and a memory of him that will always epitomise his first year for me is of him lying on his back in the crowded waiting room of our doctor's surgery and using his feet to spin around on his back, his gaze shifting from one face to the next and shouting at its owner, however willing or unwilling, until they engaged him in his shrieking, babbling conversations he demands endlessly from anyone around him, be they Mindal, Nakira or me, the startled faces of Zeus or Freyja our cats or his giraffe (a crocheted soft toy) or Upsy-Daisy, a wide-eyed, bright-faced happy doll belonging to Nakira. He is also clearly beginning to recognise meaning in speech: "Big Sister", "Nakira", "Mummy", "Upsy-Daisy" as well as "Sascha" and "Ngiri" are all words that bring a flash of bright kenning bursting into his eyes and an instant smile. Sascha's typical day now includes a substantial portion of a cow's production for the day, at least 5 000 smiles and giggles, 2 000 frowns of deep concentration as he pores intently over the things he comes across in his path, a few tears from bumped heads, 4 000 grunts as he drags himself ponderously from one place to another, 500 kisses, mostly from Mindal, Nakira and me but a growing number from him as he opens his mouth and lunges at you in a "lamprey snog" (it's taken a little while for me to lose the instinctive fear that he is indeed kissing rather than about to bite with those razor sharp newly sprung little teeth) and at least 20 000 words in his as yet ununderstandable personal language! Oh, and, without fail, at least one outfit as he most generously cleans the floor for us as his onesie is dragged over it. A patent on a onesie made of Enjo material perhaps?

For her part, Nakira has had little trouble letting her "Ngiri" into her life. Last year, she was clearly foreboding ill and rather worried about the new coming as she had quite a morbid fascination for stories about new babies coming home to find their once beloved older siblings now forsaken by their now overstretched parents who are flat out caring for

the littlest one. Of course there was an impact and for the first two or so months Nakira quite openly and understandably said that she didn't like her new brother, a sentiment that swiftly evolved into her most earnestly telling me one day "I don't like him, but I know I'll love him one day" with a solemn face that could have been decades older! I don't quite recall when I first heard "I love you Ngiri" (shouted in a heartfelt booming voice that would wake the dead) followed by one of her smothering hugs, but it was definitely warming our days as a particularly grey, wet and cold Melbourne Winter took hold. All in all, she seems to have done most of her worrying about the coming of her new sibling before he came and to have way overestimated the effect he would have on her life. A few days ago, when Mindal was talking about weaning him owing to a dwindling milk supply, Nakira was horrified, screaming, "You can't do that, he'll starve to death" and took quite a bit of reassuring that her little Ngiri would come to no harm. Her first assertions on meeting anyone for the first time are "My name's Nakira, I'm four years old and I have a little brother called Sascha-Ngiri and he's nought". Certainly, Sascha only needs to hear her voice in the distance to go berserk with glee, bursting into a huge smile and flailing his arms wildly in a way that leaves Mindal and me wondering whether we have begotten a boy or a bird!

Nakira continues to be intensely intrigued by the written word. I was horrified that the first word I witnessed Nakira sounding out and reading for herself independently was "Tatts" (*i.e.* Tattersalls, a company that sells us such useful wares as lottery tickets and other kinds of online gambling) which she spontaneously sounded out and read from a billboard whilst we were stopped in our car at traffic lights. Always exquisitely aware whenever she is not in the know, she has felt left out for a long time now by her lack of being able to read and yearning to grasp this new skill. I have also felt that this has been a quest that looms large in her mind, and she is somewhat frustrated by the size of the project it behoves. "I know all the letters and their sounds, and I know some words, so why can't I read?!" Well, of course she *can* in a very primitive kind of way, but she hasn't yet grasped that there isn't really any "can-or-cannot-hood" about it, but rather there is simply a question of how *fluently* one can read and this of course is something that comes little by little with practice. The slow getting of a skill in this way, rather than being suddenly able to say "I can do it" is not something she has experienced or been aware of before. I only hope that the joy she clearly draws from books and stories, both hearing them told and making them up herself, will continue once she decides she can read and that the new ability will further energise her joy rather than being a bit of an anticlimax. The highlight of my day is more often than not listening to her make up her stories with her complicated scenes and characters, as I have talked about above. She is on the one hand clearly quite private about it – a question of "what's happening" will elicit a coy "it's just my story" – she clearly dislikes having to explain it to outsiders and seems to be (unjustifiably) embarrassed. She clearly considers this creativity to be an intimate part of herself and is thus understandably wary of stripping it bare. On the other hand she is clearly chuffed that Mindal and I are openly delighted by her stories. She thinks deeply about the world around her, and has concluded, all by herself it seems and with an impeccable logic, that the first person in the world had to have been a "she", otherwise how could there be babies and thus more people and moreover she theorises that the first "she" was born in the dirt. Likewise, space can't end because if there were an edge, what would be over the other side (I guess the notion of a closed manifold and the strong Whitney Embedding Theorem are a few years off yet for her!!!). We get many questions and theories from her about why we live and die; although Mindal and I as scientists delight in seeing such thinking in our daughter, it sometimes seems a little bit of a shame that the innocence of four-year-old-hood has to be weighed down so. The questions and thoughts as far as Mindal and I can tell almost wholly take shape in Nakira's mind without help; since they have an eerie likeness to much of human early knowledge and theorising about our beginnings, one wonders whether their asking is almost hardwired into all of us. Certainly, I have always felt that Nakira's need to learn is instinctive and leads me to feel that this is likely an animal instinct in us all almost as important as the need to feed. Like we see with her reading endeavours, it seems that once a question or task takes hold of Nakira, she won't let go. Almost always she has either Mindal or me lie with her whilst she goes to sleep and we listen to her musings as she wrestles with big questions. It is a relief and a joy that she does balance such seriousness with a ready ability to work herself up into fits of "giggling Gertie" laughter over the silliest of things! She read a story nearly a year ago about an octopus who was futilely trying to explain a "knock knock" joke to his friend The Cowboy, beginning "Knock, knock. Who's there? Lettuce" whereupon Cowboy, utterly unable to grasp that the punchline only comes after he takes part in the game and says "Lettuce who?", starts shrieking at octopus that this is crazy talk, only to conclude that a lettuce knocking on the door would be "pretty dang funny" and that the joke is after all a good one. This exchange had Nakira nearly suffocating for laughing, and she still to this day often says, "The Giant Lettuce is knocking at the door, Papa" when someone comes to the door and we still both think that this is sidesplittingly funny! We have decided, on the advice of Kindergarten teachers and crèche carers, that she will go to school in 2012 rather than next year.

Mindal has been at home all year with Sascha, and, since Optiscan is still wobbly on its legs, I have not returned to five days a week, so we have gotten to have four days a week with all four of us together at home. Mindal asserts that her year has been highly enjoyable but is now looking for paid work. She will hopefully begin sometime early in the New Year, when we shall both be working again three days a week as we were for the first three years of Nakira's dry life. On the days when I am at work, Nakira and Sascha's Aunty Jane (Mindal's sister) come over and they all have a wonderful time without me!

For myself, life outside raising my children has been somewhat amusing. I must tell the tale, as a salutary lesson to everyone, of the Great Virtual Photonics Share Swindle. Some of you will know that I used to work for a software company call Virtual Photonics, which comprised Melbourne and Berlin optical physicists who wrote mathematical models for optical devices, most notably to be used by the telecommunications industry, during the dot com boom bust, which I must say seems quite lame in comparison with the happenings of 2008 and 2009. Many of us (Melbourne or Berlin co-workers) were given equity in the company as a swap for what we brought in. Notwithstanding that the company comprised Australian and German workers together with a good deal of money from both their respective governments, the directors saw fit to incorporate in Delaware, USA even though there wasn't an American in sight. Ten years later we find out why: the same directors used their majority shareholding to rewrite the company constitution and make a transaction that would be thoroughly illegal in either Australia or Germany that simply cancelled the shareholdings of everyone else. In theory Delaware law gave us a legal avenue to contest this behaviour – the catch was that the likely lawyer's fees for prosecuting this action were so high that even a combined stolen shareholding of us betrayed shareholders approaching \$US2M in worth was chickenfeed in comparison. The lesson for anyone is never to enter an agreement outside your own jurisdiction, and especially not in Delaware. One of the lawyers we approached to act for us told us that the techniques used had become an especially common way for venture capitalists to steal intellectual property from those who create it in the last years. For my own part, I actually find the whole thing blackly funny: a foreseeable comically cowardly lack of honour on the part of characters whose word I never trusted anyway. It is funny to look back on these same people ten years ago, shameless spouting endlessly about how much the shares were going to be worth. Most of us did have the foresight even then to know that such talk was delusional - we even used to amuse ourselves evaluating our company directors on the DSM-IV criteria for psychosis (DSM-IV is a manual used by psychiatrists and what a psychiatrist friend of mine summarises as the "What Looney is That?" manual) and concluded that the only thing saving our directors from a diagnosis of true psychosis was that they were so steeped in a culture of idiot share analysts and fund managers making the same delusional claims (psychosis, at its essence requires that one should hold beliefs untenable in the surrounding culture; but here the surrounding culture was an army of gold Amex waving, morals-bereft, overweening delusionals, so one actually couldn't make that diagnosis!). However, even so, there was always going to be reasonable worth in our shares if honest dealings would have prevailed, just nothing like the delusional claims made, and there were others who lost much more than I did, who had poured their lives into the affair and whom it was no laughing matter for. If any of you are ever faced with such a contract or deal, I shall be more than happy to tell you the story in full!

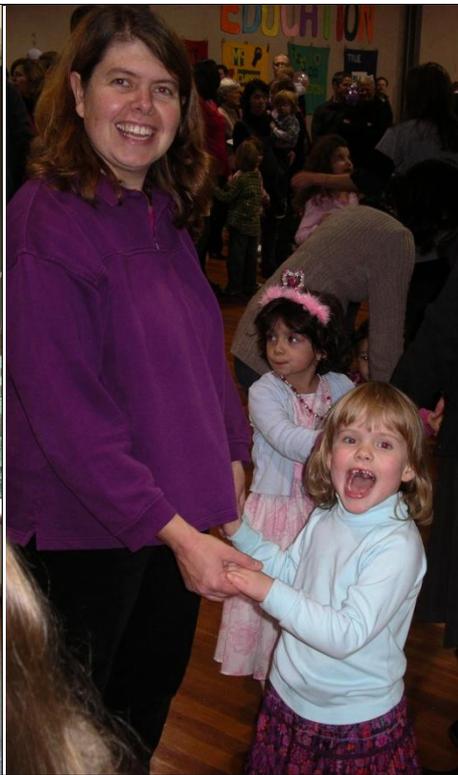
Our cats Zeus and Freyja still fight for places on beds and wrestle for our attention. Nakira would desperately like to be Freyja's friend but Freyja is a little wary of her whirlwind nature, so getting to stroke Freyja is for Nakira almost as big a project as learning to read. Zeus is now fourteen and the dear soul is beginning to show his age – he was diagnosed with diabetes two months ago and now we are giving him injections twice a day. We are having a bit of strife stabilising his sickness; hopefully we'll get there and we're hoping his time hasn't come quite yet as he is a grand friend and he and Nakira are really enjoying each other's company these days.

Anyhow, Mindal, Nakira, Sascha, Zeus, Freyja and I thank you warmly for your ongoing friendship and wish you all a wonderful New Year.

Love to you all Rod



Papa, Nakira and Sascha (in sling) go forth to meet the fairies



Nakira and Mindal at kindergarten bush dance



Hmmm... butter wouldn't melt in my mouth!



After a few months, Nakira and Sascha-Ngiri love each other's company



Possum's outfit by Polly Pocket (a tiny doll)!



There's always room for someone else...

