

Dear Friends

Here I go again with my end of year ramblings to you for 2011. For us at 54 Main Street Blackburn, there were three big happenings – Sascha learnt to speak, Nakira did her last year of kinder and Mindal went back to fulltime work. Meanwhile, I swapped places with Mindal and now look after our little ones most of the time.

2011 began with our yearly holiday to Inverloch, which proved a great couple of weeks catching up with several lots of friends who came down to spend time with us. Nakira got herself a bit of a fright getting swept off into the tidal rip stream that runs along the beach at Anderson inlet – being watched by Mindal, Jane and me she was only out of her depth for a few seconds before we dragged her out but the fright was enough to keep her out of the water for most of the two weeks (it was nearly enough to make me physically throw up) and she only went back in with a big pink lifejacket we bought for her that same day. She demanded we get her something like a lifejacket after her ordeal and I don't know which of us – Nakira or I - was keener for her to wear this pillow of a thing that, as well as making her float, made her look like a float at the Sydney Mardi-Gras. The rip is fairly gentle and steady – locals amuse themselves by floating on their backs in it with a bottle of beer in one hand, being borne along the beach sometimes very drunk yet with surprisingly few mishaps – but when you're four years old and can't fully swim it's pretty scary. Sascha, still commando crawling, loved the sand at the beach and sheltering from the sun with his toys in our beach tent and watching the people on the beach coming and going. As in foregoing years, Nakira spent much time trying to run a seagull down and showed a keen interest in the afternoon fishermen and women who daily set up camp on the inlet. She would walk up and down the beach looking at what they were catching and earnestly asking them questions like "what kind of bait are you using?" She became expert on the local fish and was also enthralled by the charts of fish that are pinned up on the walls at the beach house we rented, particularly one showing deep sea fish that look scarier than dead John Howard exhumed. Nakira now has her own fishing rod, so she'll be joining the afternoon throng this year. This year I'm still a little wary about the water, so I expect we shall be mainly swimming in the shallow sandflats further up the inlet where streams and rips don't run nearly so much: Nakira is still only at the "Turtle Silver" level in her swimming lessons, which means she can fetch a weighted ring from the bottom of the pool and swim a few strokes underwater. I guess a turtle made of silver likely wouldn't swim that well.

The two weeks were a little overshadowed by the thought of our poor cat Zeus who became suddenly diabetic at the end of last year and had to stay at our vet's for two weeks getting daily insulin injections whilst we holidayed. Whether I were going to see him again was a thought that bumped about in the back of my mind, but it turned out that his diabetes was short lived, being caused by pancreatitis: maybe Sascha's first year before had been as stressful for him as 2010 had been for Kevin Rudd (who, as you likely recall, suffered the same disease). Two weeks at the vet's without Sascha poking him in the face and giving him great big bearhugs seemed to do wonders for him, and his pancreatitis got better (quite seldom in a cat – apparently very few are not killed by it) and we don't have to give him insulin injections anymore. Zeus seems well but is showing his age – not being very active these days and sleeping alot. He still loves a cuddle and purrs like a steam train when he shoves himself onto your lap and settles down. Zeus is lumbering about our back garden as I write this and is about to cop a hiding from the nesting wattlebirds who are watching him and discussing angrily the cat divebombing mission in the offing. Off they go! Zeus ducks his head – it's the first he's been aware of them. No doubt he'll be driven back inside soon and will be seeking my lap out for a cuddle.

Flowers, wheels and soft toys have become three obsessions of Sascha's. After having been shown a dandelion in seed about five months ago and enjoying blowing its seeds into the winds with me, he declared the word for a flower was "bubble" and that is what he has known flowers as ever since (likening the dandelion seeds to bubbles that we often blow at bathtime). I think he decided then and there that the lowly dandelion flower was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen – he's been enthralled by flowers ever since. "ALL THE BUBBLES!!!!" he screams indignantly, stretching his arms out as though they're going to pop out of his shoulders towards the flowers in the grass he sees rushing past his stroller if we're in a hurry somewhere and we don't have time to stop so he can pick them. He just can't understand why someone would want to walk by them without stopping to look at them carefully and pick them. I never knew just how many flowers less than a millimetre across there are in the world until I spent time with Sascha: he crawls carefully through the grass seeking them out and shows me myriads of little yellow, purple and orange ones

so small that twenty would fit on your little fingernail. Often they are lone flowers in a sea of green weeds around them and seeking them out is patient and meticulous work, but he focuses on it so intently and draws so much joy from finding them. Already he knows quite a few of them by name – “buttercup” (said in full), “lion” (dandelion), “panther” (agapanthus) (also sometimes known by him, for some bizarre reason, as “peas”), “rose”, “zania” (gazania) and “daisy”. He can quickly spot a lone buttercup instantly in a sea of dandelion flowers, even though I must get much nearer than he does to do so. He seems extremely keenly drawn to the colour yellow so I’m wondering whether he might be highly sensitive to this colour and can thus spot the colour difference between a dandelion and buttercup yellow (even though they seem the same to my eye). Or maybe he likes the shininess of the buttercup. He seems also keen on deep pinks and purples, which means that a prize row of gerberas up the road from us is now looking a bit worse for wear after a little hand slithered over the fence to snatch one for its owner as we walked by when I wasn’t looking. One gerbera was linked to many neighbours and the little hand was travelling swiftly along with its owner in the stroller – you can guess the rest.

Sascha’s second love seems to be anything that spins – and anything with wheels. Before fully crawling he would twirl the wheels on his toys or anything else he could find (like his stroller) endlessly. He calls anything with wheels a “Car” and, even though his vocabulary is now approaching about three hundred words, only very, very lately has he begun using other words like “bike” for the different contraptions he sees scurrying about his world on wheels (quite strange, given the precision that many of his words are now taking on, like those for the different kinds of flowers). I don’t think I have yet met a child quite so in love with wheeled contraptions as Sascha seems to be – Mindal half jokingly worries whether our son might be in danger of becoming a hoon! All children his age I have met seem to be highly impressed by cars and especially trucks and busses, but I think this interest, keen though it seems universally to be, is much more instinctive and is more about being drawn to something big and moving and thinking the thoughts of our African forebears – Is it friend, foe or fiend? Is it a threat? Would it feed us if I hunted it down with my brothers and sisters? Nakira at this age staring at the bus that goes down our street and obsessively insisting that she be let see exactly what it was doing every day more reminded me of the cheetahs that sit at Werribee plains zoo in their paddock on a hill and intently watch the cars below fanging down the Geelong freeway - I’m sure they’re saying to themselves, “could I bring one of those down and would it taste good if I did?”. Sascha on the other hand likes to go up to a parked car and actually feel the most important bit (to him), the “Wheel” as he gleefully shouts. “Touch wheel” he says if we’re going past a parked car in his stroller, and if there isn’t a “bubble” that demands inspecting and picking first. A book about a personified car “Roland the Ranger Vehicle” is so beloved it gets literally eaten! (a personified car?! Go figure! –seems utterly bizarre to me although I have egg on my face foretelling that a “personified train” would never fly as a child’s toy when it first came out in 1988. You can guess its name – Thomas!). Toy cars – about as cuddly as a toy plastic velociraptor Nakira took to bed at this age - join him in his cot along with his third big love, and that is soft toys. Anything with a face (“FAACE”, with huge, gleeful stress on the “A” is one of Sascha’s favourite words). He now takes to bed “Dor-Dor” (a giant Dora the Explorer doll he fell in love with at a toy fair and who is so big he can sleep on her like a mattress), “Waadi” (his name for his beloved crocheted Giraffe and whom we called “Godwinson Giraffe”, a name Sascha preemptorily cast aside and replaced with his own “Waadi”), “Tiger” (self explanatory), “Lambie” (likewise), “Daisy” (an “Upsy-Daisy” from “Night Garden”) and “Lizza” (a fleecy goanna). The company seems to be constantly growing, and, when they’re not being hugged to death, they get brought to life with Sascha making up little conversations for them. At first I thought he was rote-copying Nakira as she makes up stories with her toys, but I’m surer and surer that it’s Sascha’s very own make believe, especially when I think about the following – he’s very drawn to dolls especially if they’re obviously doing anything he can relate to: lying in a cot, or being in a stroller (Dor-Dor gets strapped in and taken for walks) or in the bath. In situations like these he will invariably begin putting the “baby” to bed, or bathing it or whatever the situation calls for. Sometimes his doll conversations can shatter the dead of night at 3am!

As I said above, 2011 has been Sascha’s year of the word. Nakira’s speech, some of you will recall, was quite delayed, owing mainly to quite deep hearing loss from ear infection, and came quite a bit latter than Sascha’s is coming, so it all came in a rush and seemed pretty complete when it did come. We didn’t really get the little words here and there – just heaps of babbling that seemed to become multi-clause sentences one day when she was about two and a half. So now Mindal and I are having the joy of seeing a little person stitch their language together word by word for the first time. It makes me a little sad for Nakira, though – she would have done the same thing but in a much lonelier way, her

parents not able to understand and not able to delight in her little steps. Sascha seemed to start saying words quite early – it's nearly twelve months ago that he began saying "Ca, Ca" whenever one of our cats came near, and he's always been a highly vocal baby. However, things seemed to freeze up a bit when he had a minor operation in the middle of the year – poor Sascha's confidence in the world was thoroughly shattered by the operation, his speech stopped and, worst of all, he lost his delightful little way of "flirting" with new people: he would always go out of his way to force someone newly met to meet his gaze and suddenly he wouldn't look at anyone at all. A review visit to the surgeon after the operation prompted Sascha to look him rather ferociously in the eye and say, very forcefully and aggressively "BYE!" when we left. Slowly Sascha's confidence came back and with it his speech and his love of the social, so that, by three months after the operation, the words and then little phrases and sentences were coming thick and fast. Some of Sascha's precision with words is already remarkable, alongside imprecision that can be hilarious. Not yet naming different kinds of birds, Sascha calls any fowl a "duck"; a few weeks ago at Wilson's Promontory we went into the scrub looking for emus when we didn't see the big flock I remembered there on my last visit ten twelve years beforehand and I wanted to know whether the emus had lived through the fires that scorched the Promontory three years ago. We were about to give up when a giant female strode out of the scrub ahead of the car and Sascha (who we thought was asleep in his car seat) began delightedly squealing "Duck! Duck!" – and had Nakira nearly splitting herself laughing. As well as "bubble", some of my favourite words that Sascha says are: "Sign cat" (a picture of a cat), "too tall" (I can't reach it) "Horse Cheetah" (a soft cheetah toy that's life size and which he sits astride and sings songs to) as opposed to just "Cheetah" (another much smaller hand puppet), "All-gone-cup" (empty cup) and, rivalling the Teletubbies, "Again! Again!" (this one often when I give him a little back massage whilst he has his bottle before his midday sleep). The word "Dinosaur" is ALWAYS followed by "RAAAH"! (You couldn't be Nakira's little brother and not know the word "Dinosaur"). It's interesting that, although his already quite big vocabulary has almost no adjectives as we would know them, there are quite a few of his own made up descriptors and he already knows that they come before what they are talking about in his language. I'd bet a big sum that if he were speaking French, he would now be saying "cup all-gone" and "Cheetah Horse" (or their French equivalents).

So now Nakira's finished kindergarten and is weeks away from beginning school. I can't believe that little girl who fitted on my forearm is already six years old – sometimes I even feel what can only be described as a stabbing grief for time together that is slipping by so swiftly. Nakira was blessed this year by two especially devoted teachers. I was at first quite disappointed when Nakira didn't get the educational director at our kinder – the oldest and most experienced teacher there – but the teachers she did get, Clare and Anne-Marie, quickly quelled any misgivings as their willingness, indeed joyful enthusiasm for taking the time and making the effort to get to know each different child and their own needs intimately impressed me greatly. Nakira came home with heaps of wonderful paintings – the most common themes were paintings of herself (always with coils springing from either side of her head standing for her much beloved plaits) together with Sascha – the latter first on all fours and then later standing beside her - as well as prehistoric scenes with the different dinosaurs that she loves. Her interest in Dinosaurs, now nearly three years old, just keeps getting deeper and deeper and broadens to a keen interest in all animals. I was astonished one day when she took one fleeting look a picture in a book (no less than the "Oxford book of dinosaurs") and declared a picture to be wrong, because it showed a flowering tree beside a stegosaur (flowering plants evolved after the stegosaur died out)- in her words because "there were no angiosperms in the Jurassic period". We have recently spent many hours together watching documentaries like "Walking with Dinosaurs" together, which she wants to watch over and over even though they're a bit gruesome and she hides her head in my lap from time to time. She felt desperately sorry for the giant Liopleuridon (a gigantic sea monster who ate everything alive or once-alive in sight and even ate the stones at the bottom of the sea to help weigh him down so that he wouldn't have to waste air fighting his own buoyancy) washed ashore in a ferocious Jurassic storm in one of the episodes to become food for the waiting little meat eating dinosaurs, saying to me several times "If only I could go and shove him back into the sea". She declares she wants to be a zoologist when she grows up – a calling that stood out when her classmates were asked what they wanted to be together with "archaeologist" (declared by her friend Bianca who devotedly watches Tony Robinson's "Time Team") as well as some of the likelier ones like "superhero", "princess", "fireman" and "rockstar". I had a great time getting to know Nakira's little friends as I took the chance to put my name down for kinder duty at least three times a term (just so I could see Nakira with her friends). This worked pretty well at first when Sascha wasn't so mobile and I could get the children involved in feeding him and get them talking about their own little sisters and brothers and thinking about

what babies might need and feel. However, later on I was several times interrupted from my reading to a group of children by a little tap on the shoulder or by some little panting person heaving ten kilogram Sascha off his feet towards me, their arms around his waist so tightly he was red in the face and with a little voice saying something like, “your baby’s bothering us again, you’ll have to take him away”!

Mindal and I swapped roles in July as a chance came up for Mindal to take a job she really wanted to do. We tried to work it that both Mindal and I would work three days a week as we did when Nakira was born, but Mindal’s seeking part-time work came to nought for fifteen months after Sascha was born. Mindal was missing her work sorely, so when the opening came up we decided we’d give it a go. Mindal is enjoying her new workplace – it sounds like it’s run much more professionally, competently and respectfully of its staff than her former workplace whose management combined a grotesquely overswollen sense of self importance with an utter lack of people skills to make Dave from “The Office” look worthy of a business leadership award. I am still working a day a week for Optiscan, where things seem to be looking up. It must have been my leaving that did it! I have gathered together a heap of material for a mathematics textbook that I want to write, but so far this project is going rather slowly. Nakira and Sascha rightfully take up most of my time, and Optiscan’s keenness on an interesting project I help to begin there hotted up quite markedly soon after I left, so I am giving much of my leftover time to seeing this exciting job finished. I shall hopefully step up output on my book in the New Year. But there are bigger fish next year too – Nakira’s first year at school, and Sascha’s growing grip on the language he shows every sign of loving and enjoying as much as his older sister clearly has and is.

Lots of love to you all – Mindal, Nakira, Sascha, Zeus, Freyja and Rod

		
<p>In the only bath at the holiday house</p>	<p>Car!</p>	<p>All creatures grappling for lapspace</p>
		
<p>Nakira buils her own jungle in the garden</p>	<p>Heavy construction underway at kinder</p>	<p>A fave thing to do: making cupcakes ...</p>



... and even the ingredients are excited



At Chloe's fairy party



Nakira watched the laying of new water mains for a whole morning



Life is good! You only need the right Perspective!



Zeus accepts Nakira as a lap warmth giver



The Curse of the Snood! Sascha fancies himself wearing it, but battles the discomfort of doing so.



Nakira and Dora often discuss the world on two specially placed stools in the bathroom that Sascha has been setting up pretty much every day



Getting steady on my feet!



Nakira and I made a triceratops mask together. Nakira's favourite of the ten step instructions was "No. 10 - Now don your mask and go scare your friends!"