

Dear Friends and fellow Spacefarers on Spaceship Earth

2013 was a quiet year for Mindal, Nakira, Sascha and me. The furthest we wandered from Melbourne was Inverloch and Heathcote. The formal was for our yearly holiday for two weeks in January, the latter to go to one of Mindal's office parties. One of the directors of the company Mindal works for has a hobby winery there and we went on a warm and beautiful February day. There was a graveyard of wrecked tractors and suchlike dreary machines - one of the common delightful defining features of rural Australia - next door so I thought Sascha would have a wonderful time looking at them, he was instead rather scared of them and it was Nakira who was fascinated by them. Although Sascha find machines interesting, he's a bit wary of them "in the flesh", a wariness that I happy for him to have given several of my more distant relatives have met very sticky and gruesome ends over the years through accidents with farm machinery. Sascha on the other hand was delighted by some tiny garden decorative windmills across the road from the party tiny Dutch figures sporting clogs driven by the "spinning fan", as Sascha delightedly called it.

Nakira has spent a wonderful year at school and is very sad to be going on school holidays! She adored her teacher Jamie Buccilli, who left in November to have a little daughter, who I think would have poked her head out into the dry World by now. Nakira spends most of her spare time reading, mostly learning about the natural world through her many biology and dinosaur books and by wandering around Wikipedia. I'm rather glad she is fond of some fiction as well, with Geronimo / Thea Stilton (a pseudonym for an Italian publishing house) and Elisabeth Beresford (the Wombles author) being amongst her favourites. I'm delighted she's so keen on science of course, but scientific writing is a woeful model for living language, begetting such linguistic "gems" as "I formulated a strategy to implement my idea" (yes this one actually came out of Nakira about a year ago, which I answered by, "Do you mean that you thought of a way to do it?"). Although meant less weaselly than most managementspeak, scientific writing is full of otherwise trash, lifeless words and idioms that lend themselves rather too readily to being worked into the sludge coming out of the mouths of those trying to pass themselves off as leaders these days. I rather think it should be a goal of HSC to make sure that graduating students find such dross altogether ununderstandable. Sascha seems to have inherited some of Nakira's keenness for dinosaurs and animals: the two of them were delightful together earlier in the year on a visit to the museum. As soon as Sascha caught sight of the huge dinosaur skeletons, he began running around roaring at them and Nakira joined in too. Although having their clashes like any siblings, Sascha and Nakira seem to have a particularly special relationship; Nakira, for example, can be quite competitive with her friends, but with "Little Moo" that competitive edge altogether melts away and she is very protective and gentle with the brother. She made a telling comment once when she was talking about Sascha going to school, "he'll likely be better at reading than I was when I began school"; something I don't think she would ever say about one of her friends for example. One of their favourite little activities, and one of the best forms of isometric exercise for me, is a game of "Cave". This is about my lying in our bed holding up a hollow in the doona with an outstretched leg and arm for many minutes at a time whilst two wild children jump and wriggle about in the hollow tickling one another and screaming out the chant they've made up this game "In the cave, in the cave, in the cave...". It's not exactly comfortable for me, but they're both so delightful and hilarious that I can often keep this up for a good half hour. The pair of them get into very silly moods where they chase each other around and around the house: Sascha loves any kind of game of chase, the pair of them shriek and giggle delightedly. Sascha has a very particular shrill shriek when he is excited and delighted at the same time. Although the silly moods often mean quite a bit of cleaning up afterwards, it is a great joy to be in the house when they happen. Often I go to school assembly as a way of keeping up with what's happening at school; with all I have to read in life, trawling through the school newsletter is not a great joy for me and I'd rather go to hear announcements made in a hall thronging with delighted children all thoroughly full of life. At the school assemblies, Nakira's teacher Jamie has been happy for Sascha to sit next to his big sister. Sascha is so proud to be sitting with "the big children", and he looks up at me, putting his finger to his lips and goes "Shhh" to me when the assembly begins, the most often spends assembly his head on Nakira's lap, with Nakira just as proud to have her "Little Moo" with her. One of Nakira's highlights this year was Italian Fiesta Day where all the children in the school had to dress up as an Italian character. She chose to be a baryonyx - a dinosaur found (as fossils of course) in Italy that looks a bit like Charlie the Crocodile from Maisy but with sharper and more baleful looking teeth. Nakira planned and made her whole costume from scratch from old boxes, with creative ideas like cardboard cones stuck onto dishwashing gloves for baryonyx's claws (he had a fearsome thumb for running hapless fish through with and indeed baryonyx means "heavy thumb"). It was especially wonderfully to see

something decidedly homemade given that so many of the costumes had clearly been hired. Nakira's friend Ben also went for a homemade number: he went pretty much in his normal clothes but with a hat with a beautifully detailed cardboard leaning tower of Pisa sprouting from it.

As with last year of course Sascha and I are at home together a lot whenever I am not at work (Mondays and Fridays). Sascha has developed quite a love of coffee shops and we go often to Gourmet Girls in Laburnum. There he has a chai latte and a small chocolate chip biscuit, and any often likes to play "hide and seek" under the trees just outside. This usually entails his telling me to count to ten, then also telling me where he is going to hide: often it's something like "Now you count Papa, and then come and find me behind the ...." (tree, telephone box, and so forth). Another great love that has developed this year is that of aeroplanes. I've learnt more about aeroplanes than I've ever wanted to know. A favourite outing for Sascha is simply to go to Tullamarine ("Tubalarine") airport and watch planes coming and going or watching bags being laden and unladen from the bellies of the aeroplanes that have come into the terminal. We once saw a cat being laden on to a plane and Sascha wanted me to ring the "owner of the airport" to make sure that the cat would be all right. At this stage, an aeroplanes colour seems to be the attribute most important for setting whether it will be interesting to Sascha: he likes the red Virgin ones the best and he has a toy green Aer Lingus jumbo jet he's very fond of. Sometimes I have to show him "aeroplanes on the 'puter" meaning we will sit down together and look for a couple of hours at galleries of "eighty Airbus" (his name for "A380 Airbus") and suchlike. There are some mind numbing things - maybe I should say "meditation aids" - on YouTube that get uploaded by aeroplane enthusiasts: one amazing and apparently well liked, given the number of votes it gets, arcane ritual that is often filmed and put on YouTube is the "unboxing": where a collector enthusiast takes the pieces of their newly gotten addition to their model plane collection out of their box and puts them together. Such a video typically entails two hands fumbling with bits of plastic until they are at last worked into the finished product: I would find this excruciatingly boring were it not for that Sascha is clearly enthralled!

In May I took a few days off my childrearing and stayed in Sydney with my friend François and got to compare nerd notes with his work at UNSW as well as visiting his newly built house near Mount Victoria in the Blue Mountains. Thank goodness after all François's building and planning work it survived the fires in October, but the backburning was apparently pretty near to François's back door! I saw for the first time in my visit the haze that gives the Blue Mountains their name: formerly I had been there in the Summer (the last time was the Summer at the end of 2004 the year before our dear little Nakira came into the World) and the haze was never obvious. It's quite subtle and only seen in certain sunlight but it's a bit like a very soft oily rainbow shimmering subtly above the trees in the netherest parts of the canyons.

Mindal has just completed her first year working with Keystone, a company that sells and maintains the database software that Mindal is expert at building and configuring. It seems like a friendly workplace, although one of the directors is wont to bang on a great deal; we were subjected to well over an hour of speeches by him at the office Xmas party last week (this is the same guy who has the winery at Heathcote). The company has just been bought by a listed swallower company, so we are yet to find out what that will mean for the work environment. Mindal works just next door to Glenferrie station and looks out the window over Glenferrie Road, so it's a very pleasant environment. Sascha and I and sometimes Nakira go in by train to have lunch with Mindal: Sascha is always ecstatically excited to see her for lunch and he now kens every "exciting" train station on our trainline: we have "Glenferrie" where "Mummy Works", "Laburnum" where his favourite coffee shop "Gourmet Girls" is and "Mont Albert" where the "Thomas Shop" is. Nakira goes to an activities group in Mont Albert shopping centre every Saturday morning, and whilst she is there, Sascha and I go to a coffee shop across the road whose owner has a slight obsession with railways and trains. There are many toy "Thomas the Tank Engines" there for Sascha to play with and also more than a few station signs and other paraphernalia which I'm pretty sure have been nicked.

Well this letter has been somewhat shorter than in former years but as I said it's been a quiet year for us. Mindal, Nakira, Sascha and I all hope 2013 has been and that 2014 will be good to you.

Lots of love

Rod, Mindal, Nakira ("Little Bairn") and Sascha ("Little Moo").



With Charleah at Inverloch beach house



Wearing Mummy's sunglasses



Two Snugglepusses



First day of Grade 1 with Nakira's friend Ben



Nakira with her grade 1 teacher Jamie Buccilli on first day of grade 1



Nakira becomes an Italian dinosaur in homemade baryonyx costume



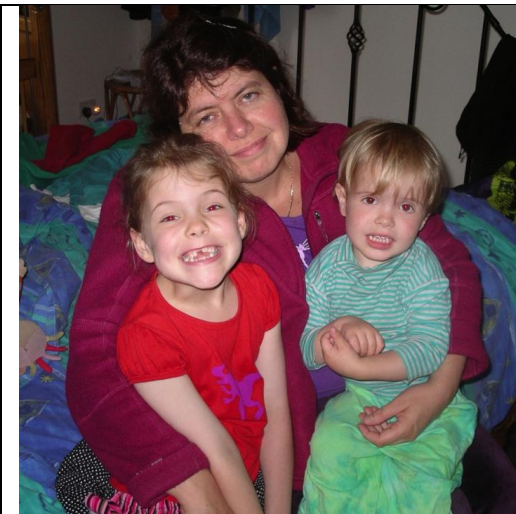
Sascha and a meerkat talk to each other about each other's World



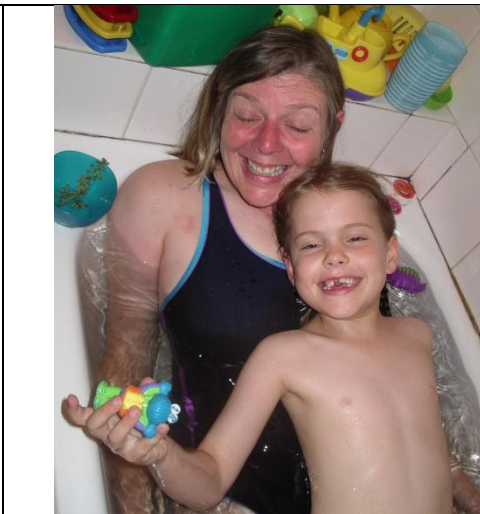
You never know who or what may show up when you have tea with Nakira



Nakira decides Zeus (still going strong at 17) needs a cuddle from a fellow cat



Snuggling with mummy



Nakira loves her Aunty Jane, who visits most weeks



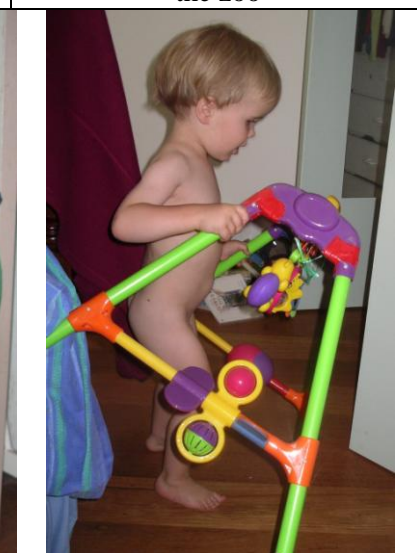
Nakira wields a chainsaw at the junior zookeepers play area at the zoo



Now Nakira decides Zeus needs a really squeezey cuddle



Are you thinking what I'm thinking B1; I think I am B2 it's "quick, there's Papa sitting down, let's jump on him" time



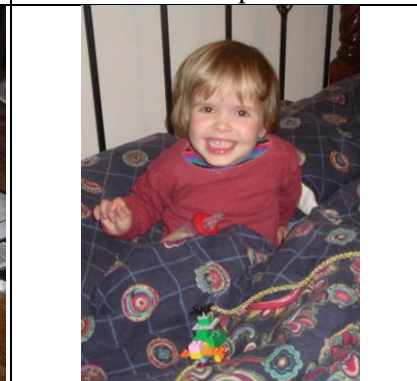
Sascha found the playgym he had as a baby and seems to recall it. He loved it so much that when it broke to pieces once he still wanted to play with the bits of plastic.



Sascha at the junior zookeepers play area at the zoo building a jungle scene: note the elephants swinging by their trunks!



Nakira's anaconda habitat scene she made in art class, with the caption, "The anaconda eats pigs, mice and deer; Anacondas live in rainforests"



Sascha shows his lego creation off: he has become remarkably deft with lego this year.