# Chapter 3

## Wednesday 20 May 2009—Tuesday 18 January 2011

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* Climbed Mount Chemo – but I was weak – walking – get used to life without daily medical attention – daily bloods etc.
* I get one-month rest – more chemo + stem cell collection – also fails. Later – doctors return – Glivec reason for failed stem cell collections…
* Make family trip to Queensland (9 Aug to 18 Aug 2009)
* Visited Peter in Brisbane. Recovering from his bone marrow transplant….
* Some big walks – use of marshmallows.
* Throughout my illness Rathiga had not gone anywhere near a swimming pool. She had gone from a child who was comfortable in the pool to one who was terrified of water. We went to Streets Beach on the southern bank of Brisbane River. It was Rathiga’s first experience with water since I had fallen ill. We dangled our feet in the water and watched the other children play. Rathiga was interested but she was glued to the sand. Kavitha and I tried to coax her into the water but she wanted nothing to do with it. After several hours of failed attempts, Kavitha sprung into action. ‘I’ve had enough of this,’ Kavitha said as she grabbed Rathiga underneath her shoulders and carried her into the water. The whaling child ruined the peace of some 100-beach-goers. Rathiga carried on as if she had been thrown into a pool of molten lava. I sought refuge behind the nearest tree and pretended that I knew neither the earsplitting child nor its cruel mother. My efforts were in vein, however, ‘your daughter doesn’t think much of the water, hey,’ ockered a passer-by.
* A few days earlier we had been building a sand castle at Perigian Beach, on Queensland’s Sunshine Coast, when a shock wave took us by surprise. Kavitha and I were gathering our things, which had been strewn all over the sand, when we realised that Rathiga was completely missing. I recalled being struck by a sudden and uncompromising fear. ‘There she is,’ Kavitha said and I turned to see that she had dumped her parents and climbed half way up the sand dunes. It was clear that it was time to teach Rathiga how to swim. Kavitha and I vowed to enroll Rathiga in swimming lessons as soon as we returned to Canberra.

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* Tired – slowly regain strength – return to work (start 1 Sept 2009 at 3 days per wk – 4hrs/day. Gradual increase until full-time return 19 Oct 2009.
* I had been so close to completing my Ph.D. when I fell ill—it was time to finish it. I returned to work at the ANU. I had a thesis to complete.
* A typical graduate student, myself included, will start their Ph.D. with enthusiasm and energy. They will attack their research with drive but they will make many mistakes. They are green! With time they will gain essential experience and fine tune their skills. This is great, but their enthusiasm falls. They are tired by the time they are writing their thesis—they are over their topic and they just want to go home. I felt like a new student starting their project for the first time, but I wasn’t a new student. I had the benefit of three years detailed study of my topic. I was already the expert and I was fresh! The combination of knowledge and enthusiasm was lethal. Finishing my thesis was not work
* Make trip to Melbourne – Dali exhibition (9 Sept 09 – 14 September) –National Gallery of Victoria

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With an estimated world population of less than 1600 the Giant Panda, or bamboo bear, is among the world’s most endangered species. Its plight was formerly recognised in 1961 by the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) who chose the iconic creature as the centerpiece for its logo. Recognised alongside the Chinese Dragon as a national emblem of the People’s Republic of China, the Giant Panda holds a special place in the hearts of people around the world; and like Xi Wangmu, the species is important in ancient Chinese culture. The bamboo bear was kept by emperors throughout the Hahn Dynasty (206 BCE—220 CE) who believed it to be a noble animal, a symbol of goodwill and a magical creature capable of warding away natural disasters and evil spirits. Sadly, the Giant panda’s presence in Wenchuan County, where greater than 30% of its population resides, could not prevent the great Sichuan Earthquake of 12 May 2008.

In the 1970s the Chinese Government loaned pandas to zoos in North America and Japan. At the time, the loans represented the most significant cultural exchanges between China and the West, an achievement now sanctified by the term “Panda Diplomacy”. The practice of loaning pandas continues today and in November 2009 two Giant Pandas, Funi (Lucky Girl) and Wang Wang (Net Net), were loaned to the Adelaide Zoo. They are the only Giant pandas in the Southern Hemisphere.

In December, Kavitha and I took Rathiga to Adelaide to celebrate Christmas with some of my family. We visited Wang Wang and Funi during the first week of public viewing and I was introduced, for the second time, to two survivors of the Great Sichuan Earthquake. Both pandas were in the Wolong Giant Panda Reserve when it was devastated by the magnitude 7.9 event. Both were sent to the Baixiongpin Yaan Research Centre to receive intensive care. Both recovered, but Wang Wang’s mother (Mao Mao) was not so lucky. She was crushed when her enclosure collapsed.

Visitors to Wang Wang and Funi’s enclosure are presented a taste of southwestern China. They are transported to an exotic mid-altitude paradise of dense bamboo and tall trees, of steep slopes and misty mountain breezes. The experience was different for me, however. Watching Wang Wang and Funi took me elsewhere. I was hauled back to the ruin of Yingxiu village. I thought of the 87,000 killed and missing—I thought of Xi Wangmu, and the journey we had followed since our encounter 14 months earlier. It was a time of reflection. I had observed the devastation and ruin of one of the world’s greatest catastrophes and I had lived through my own trauma. It was time to be thankful—thankful for all that we had.

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* By mid February I had a complete draft of my thesis. I gave the draft to Malcolm, my supervisor, and Kavitha, Rathiga and I flew to Fiji for a holiday. We booked a week at the Radison and stayed in style.
* Loads of swimming pools – we swam every day and sometimes at night, too. Rathiga learnt to float.
* Scuba diving – first time since Lake Malawi in Africa in 1999. Fly through
* It was the best family holiday we had ever had. Life was good—we hoped that it would stay that way.

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* We returned from Fiji. I addressed Malcolm’s comments and submitted my thesis two weeks later, on Friday 12 March. It was a comfortable time frame; I spent the final day reclining on my office sofa, listening to Mile Davis. Mile’s had a special way of expressing himself. It was fitting to spend my final student moments with him—I was submitting my expression of three and a half years research.

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* Tuesday return from work – forgotten mobile – full of missed calls – text from Emma - Took Kavitha for a walk – tell her I’m going back in