

I suppose all little children have their own way of letting you know they want your attention. But with your first born, their method is always a surprise. I was sitting down, quietly – just thinking... when Nicky bit me in my long toe, which sticks out because it's longer than my big toe. You'd think that your first reflex is to kick, after you've retracted your foot. Not so. I counted to three and bit back. Well, that surprised *him*! But I did not have an answer to his next attack. I was in the kitchen, bending down low, looking in the oven – when Nicky hit me on the head with the frying pan. I was stunned.

We bought a tricycle for Nicky on his second birthday. I invited him to sit on it. I put his feet on the pedals, pushing them down one after the other: right foot first, then left. He caught on straight away and off he went! Steering seemed to come natural to him as he raced around the table tennis table like a pro! I thought nothing of it – after all, he crawled at four months; walked along his playpen at six months and walked unaided when he was one... and now he was two years old and raced along on his tricycle. I nevertheless decided to wait with buying him a bicycle until he was ten, because there were as yet no children's bikes available and I did not think he would be able to reach the pedals at an earlier age than I was when I got my first bike.

One of our Jakarta friends came to visit us on a stopover in Sydney. He was on his way to Hong Kong, where he planned to settle. We were so glad to see him – we could not stop talking about the good times we'd had together and did not hesitate when he asked if he could stay with us for a week or so. He did not mind sleeping on a spare door, elevated on four 5-gallon drums. He had a few stone bottles of Dutch Genever with him... and we forgot about our struggles for a while. After a few festive nights, duty called again: Rien studied and Ewout and I did carpentry. During the day I did my household chores and painted more doors. I still worked with Nico, mixing and carting cement. I was also busy carting rocks and bush sand to fill up the space where the steps leading to the front patio were going to be. One evening, when ironing Rien's and our friend's business shirts, I felt so tired I could cry... but I stubbornly kept ironing. That night I fell into a deep sleep, dreaming that a truck was driving over my right knee – forwards – backwards – forwards. I could not stand the pain any longer and woke up to find my right knee swollen and throbbing. It was a Saturday morning, so luckily Rien could stay with me. He soon realised that a doctor was needed and went on his motorbike to the Post Office in Dee Why to ring. "He'll be here as soon as he can", Rien said when he came back.

The time dragged on and on. No Dr Waddell. Rien found half of bottle of gin and every so often I drank a nip to overcome the unbearable pain. The doctor came in the afternoon after I finished the bottle: in his haste to reach us, he had knocked down a pedestrian, breaking his leg. He was morally obliged to bring his victim to the hospital in Manly and set his leg, before he could continue going to our place. He had one look at my by that time balloon shaped leg and said, “acute infective arthritis. You need penicillin and lots of it. You better go to hospital straight away” and when he saw me shake my head, he added, “It is free, you know. You don’t have to pay anything. Come on, it’s better than staying here and getting some one to give you the injections. I’ll order the ambulance.” I was too sick to resist.

The ambulance came and kind paramedics administered morphine. With sirens howling and someone holding my hand and stroking my forehead, we arrived. I was only half conscious when I was carried on the stretcher into Manly’s public ward and put to bed.

After a while I heard another ambulance siren. That woke me up, as sirens did in those days, thinking *air alarm!* Another patient was stretchered in and put in the bed on my left. Two doctors came and I heard them talk: “She’s cut her wrists again. One of these days she’ll do it right” or words to that effect. I gathered that the woman had tried to commit suicide. “A rich woman at that” I thought as the doctors discussed the rings on her fingers. “Look at those diamonds! They’re worth a few bob! Well, we’d better take them off and put them in the safe” – and out of the corner of my eye I saw them turn the rings around in their hands. “And what have we here” They came to me. “A New Australian”. One of the doctors asked me to open my mouth. I thought he wanted to take my temperature... or look at my tongue. But no! He forced my mouth open wider and peered within. “Well looked after teeth”, he said, “Good fillings”. “Moron” I thought, “I’m not a horse! I *hate* being called a New Australian and I am *not* inferior to you lot...” and I fell asleep again.

I woke up to see a nursing sister next to my bed. She was an exact replica of the picture on the antique VAN HOUTEN COCOA tin: white cap, red cape, and white uniform. She looked at me, looked at my knee, took my temperature, my pulse and asked me where I wanted my penicillin shots. I pointed, she turned me on my side and jabbed me in the buttocks. I gratefully received some more painkillers.

Early next morning some white clad persons told me that they were going to wheel me into the theatre. “Oh!” I quipped, “That’ll be nice! I do like the theatre. What’s on?”

I was put under, good and proper. I had to count to ten and floated away after three. Better than the operation I had on my thumb during the war – hardly any anaesthetics available then...

When I came to, my knee felt as bad as before and I could not help moaning. But it was a relief that they'd put a cage over my legs to take the weight of the blankets. At the next doctor's visit it was decided to put my right leg in plaster and attach it to a pulley with a weight hanging over the foot end of the bed. Young nurses walking past, regularly ran into the weight, turning it into a pendulum with me crowing at the other end. The first visit by the night sister startled me when, notebook in hand, she sternly asked me "Bowels open today?" In my fever vision I had a brief flash of disembowelment – my only recollection of the word *bowels*, and remembered because it was so gruesome. "Bowels open?" the sister repeated impatiently. "What do you mean?" I finally reacted fearfully. Now it was the sister's turn to look startled: "Well – eh – did you have a motion?" "No, I did not move". "A stool?" she tried again. I could only dumbly shake my head... I was too confused and could not see the connection between open bowels, movement and a stool. She took pity on me, took a few steps forward and bending down to my head whispered: "Did you do a *pooh* today?" Relieved I sighed, "Yes sister, I did". With my leg in a cast and hanging in the air, I was virtually chained to my bed. Apart from only just being able to feed myself, everything else had to be done for me. Each morning at 5 am, when I was finally in deep sleep, a nurse woke me up to wash me from top to toe. Somehow she managed to change the bed linen under me – and dress me in a clean hospital nightie.

The suicide lady had left and was replaced by a talkative woman who wanted to know "how come you got this injury". So I told her about the house and the concrete mixing. "How old are you?" she enquired. "28". "Well" she said, "you stop doing that hard work or you'll be finished before the house is – and hubby (how I hated that word!) will leave you for a dainty young girl without a bum leg. Mark my word!" Patients were not allowed to smoke, but Rien had left me a packet of "Old Chum" and like a naughty schoolgirl I smoked under the blanket at night. The night nurse looked the other way after I told her that smoking eased the pain. Every day I got my penicillin shot until I called my buttocks "The Blue Mountains"!

When I started to feel a bit better. I was transferred to the opposite side of the ward, from where I could see the windows I'd been lying under. No screens. Now I knew where the flies came from to feast on food and dressings.

I had a new neighbour who came from Kangaroo Island. She told me all about the island and how she had to do her shopping, going to the mainland by boat. She had a warm heart and gave me good advice and

recipes. “Have you got health insurance?” she asked – and when I said “No!” she urged me to join a health fund. “I am here being looked after and earning money at the same time!” “How can you do that?” “Well, the hospital is free and my health insurance pays me what it would have cost me if it wasn’t!” she gloated. (Of course, when *we* joined the health fund, hospitals weren’t free anymore!)

Then she tried to give me a good recipe, but I found her hard to follow. All the time she talked about “rahs”... “What is *rahs*?” I asked in the end and she kind-heartedly described the little white grains... “Oh – *rice*!” I cried. “That’s right dear, rahs!”

You may think you have a good knowledge of English to start with – and that you’re learning new words all the time, but then you also have to remember that nuances in pronunciation (hard for you to distinguish) produce different meanings. That can be very embarrassing. The sister asked me one day: “Do you have a pan?” “Oh yes!” I said, “but be careful with it, because it’s a present from my father...”

I thought she wanted to borrow my fountain pen!

Patients who were on the mend, had to perform some light chores. Because I could not move about, I was given a tray with the most horrifying surgical instruments, which had been “sterilised”. They were still hot and wet - from boiling I think. My task was to dry and polish them with a cloth. I did my best, hoping they would never be used against me.

Of course I had visitors, but not as many as other patients. Rien came as often as he could and Riet brought Nicky a couple of times. But it hurt me too much to see my little boy with his big eyes come and go again. We both cried... so I asked Riet not to bring him again.

The healing process took so long... I became emotional every time Rien came. To give myself a boost, I asked him to bring my “national costume” and my guitar next time. He did. The nurse dressed me and put me in a wheel chair, my right leg in plaster sticking out in front like a battering ram. She wheeled me from ward to ward, whilst I sang songs I thought the patients would like. When I landed in the doctors’ canteen, I sang French songs – to get my own back. Cop that!

After having been in hospital for six long weeks, I pleaded to let me out. Finally I was allowed to go home “if there was someone to look after me”.

Ewout had bought a block of land in Lagoonview Road, a stone-throw away from us down the hill. With our experience in mind, he had started to build his own home. He and Riet had moved in as soon as the basics of