

A CHALLENGED LIFE



MONICA CANDELORO



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PROLOGUE

To Vince, Sarah and Lucas.

I am sitting in the dining / family area, and observe her, without her knowledge. She is in the kitchen starting to prepare dinner. I think she is quite amazing considering that she has the use of only one arm and one hand. I can't ask what happened, because I know.

She has adapted pretty well to the changed conditions in her life, changes that she certainly didn't ask for, but that she learnt to live with.

This is the story of her life, as she wrote it, her sanity therapy as she likes to put it, the story of a Challenged Life.

1

GROWING UP

I WAS BORN in 1965 in a small town in the French part of Switzerland, on Lake Geneva. It was very quiet and safe, with few cars on the roads and my brother Luca (2 years older than me) and I grew up playing on the streets, with all the kids from the neighbourhood. In summer we were by the lake all the time, we even found a way to get inside the castle of La Tour-de-Peilz, a medieval castle by the lake. We would play there a lot. We went to summer camps which we loved. They lasted 2-3 weeks and this way our mum knew that we were happy (and looked after) at least for half of the long summer break, so she didn't have to worry about us getting in any kind of mischief. These camps were in the mountains, we stayed in a big chalet, in dormitories. We would spend most of the day, everyday, outside, going for a long walk in a group, or doing things by ourselves. There was a stream in front of the chalet, and we used to build dams in it. We also collected snails and organised snail races. There were a few chores that we had to do in turns.

One was to go with the trailer and get the milk from a nearby farm. Another chore was to go to the post office a few kilome-

tres away to get the mail. That was our favourite one, because we would then know straight away if there was a parcel for us (parents and other family members sometimes sent parcels with treats, lollies or cookies). If the parcel was for us, we could keep one item; the rest was shared between all the kids.

In winter, we had skiing lessons for a week during the school holidays, and again, my mum knew we were fine and in the passing years we both became very good skiers. We also used to have a one week ski camp with school every winter. We were therefore either skiing, or having snow ball fights with the other kids, building snowmen, sleighing down the surrounding hills and so on, usually somewhere outside.

In autumn, we used to regularly go mushroom hunting. We'd spend the whole day walking in the forest, picking mushrooms. With the years I became quite an expert. Eating them later on was also part of the fun.

I had a beautiful childhood, with lots of outdoor activities, and I was very lucky, although we never had much money and getting to the end of the month was sometimes a bit of a struggle.

My parents divorced when I was about 3 or 4 years old. After that, my mum worked part time, mornings, from 7.30am to 1pm. She would leave by train at 7am. My brother and I would walk to our grandmother's place and wait there until it was time for school. There was a huge pine tree in front of the house, just before the external staircase, and I used to imagine that there was someone hidden behind who would try to stop me. I was a bit scared, especially in winter when it was still dark in the morning, so I used to sing at the top of my lungs when walking there, thinking that if suddenly I stopped, my grandmother would wonder why and come to the rescue.

She lived so close to school that I used to get out of the school grounds at recess to go to her place for a snack. It was

forbidden, of course, but I never got caught, and she was always pleased to see me.

She had an ice-cream shop by the lake. It was home made ice-cream, the best for many miles. I used to help her, chop the chocolate for the chocolate chip flavour and so on, and I'd help emptying the containers before putting a new batch in, of course. One treat I was never short of was ice-cream. I remember that when my brother had his tonsils out, I was jealous, because all he was allowed to eat was ice cream and yogurt. In summer, I would eat so many ice creams you would find it hard to believe it. I'd have one (3 scoops) on my way to the lake, one whilst there (2-3 scoops) and one on the way back (2-3 scoops again). They were the best.

My mum is Italian and she came to live in Switzerland when she married my father, she was then only 19. In the times of hardship, after my parents divorced, her mum, my nonna was a life saver. She used to come almost every fortnight, with bags full of food and clothes for us kids and I don't know how we would have done without her. We also used to spend most of our school holidays in Italy with our nonna and the rest of the family there, so we grew up completely bilingual. That always amazed the people in the shops. They would talk to us in French and we would translate into Italian for our grandma and vice-versa. We were only 3 or 4 then.

It also meant that we were very close to our family in Italy. My nonno would, every night, prepare camomile, which we would drink together in the kitchen. It was a ritual before going to bed. I used to get in the bed between my grandparents to watch TV. My nonno would have little space left and move to my bed in the lounge shortly after. In the middle of the night, he sometimes woke up to go to the toilet and he would just use a candle to see a bit. I used to call him the ghost. When we were in Milan, my brother and I would spend

a lot of time on the balcony overlooking the common yard of the building. We'd sit on a stool next to our nonno and he would tell us stories of trains (he used to drive a steam locomotive). It was forbidden to stop the train and if you did, you were fined. Sometimes, the train would hit a hare or rabbit. My nonno would then stop the train to get the animal that he then brought home. The fine was less expensive than buying a rabbit. He went to Siberia and told us how he used to drink vodka with the Russians. He also went to Abyssinia.

He had many interesting stories to tell, but we were too young to understand. He also used to walk with me to my cousin's place so that I could play with her. He walked so slowly I thought we would never get there.

He had the most incredible blue eyes, which gave him his name, Celeste, but always wore black sunglasses. His eyes had become so sensitive to light that he had to use them even when it was overcast.

When I was in my late teens or early 20s, finally able to understand and value his stories, my nonno had a stroke. As a result, he lost movement on the left side of his body. He was not that young anymore and had had enough, I think. In hospital, they used to call him nonno no, because he always said no to everything, and not too long after, he passed away.

The whole family went to his funeral of course. When we got to the cemetery, I was shocked to see that a trench had been dug and that coffin after coffin were put in it. It would only be filled with earth once it was full.

I ended up at the wrong coffin and the wrong family, it was quite distressful. Coming from a very small town I would never have imagined something like that. In Milan, a city of a few million people, it made sense I guess.

From the summer of 1979 and then for a few years (at least 6) we started going to a beach resort on the Adriatic coast

for the whole month of July, with my cousin, grandparents and my aunt and uncle joining us for the weekends. It used to be great fun. We became friends with all the boys and girls of our beach and really enjoyed our summers there.

It was good, because year after year after year, the same people came to the same beach, so we always found our friends again. My cousin and I used to spend most of the day at the beach (we had a nice tan by the end of the month), with a break from lunchtime to mid afternoon.

We spent hours sitting at the terrace of the bar with our friends feeding the juke box to listen to the songs we chose. In the evening, my cousin and I were allowed to go out, but only until 9-9.30. It was frustrating because as we walked back home we would see all our friends going out. It didn't take me too long to decide that we could get out of the window (I was the wild one and my cousin followed).

We could not go out later because our nonna would worry and not be able to sleep, so I thought that by going out of the window we were doing her a favour. We just wanted to see our friends and go with them have a gelato or a drink somewhere. We got close to being discovered at least once. We were about to get out of the window when we heard our grandma coming, so we jumped in the beds, dressed and all, and put the sheet over us quickly. She came in the room, didn't notice anything strange, not even my feet with shoes hanging on one side of the bed to avoid dirtying the sheets, and left. She then went back to sleep and when we thought we could hear her snore; we jumped out of the window (we were on the ground floor, of course). One night, the neighbour saw a pair of legs and then another coming out and then she saw us. We were lucky she never doxxed on us. The last year we went there, we decided to go out for the big beaches' party. We were with all the young people from our beach. There were

various tasks to do and our beach won the beach of the year title. At the end of the month we went back to Milan by train. When we got there, my cousin and nonna got off. I was staying on the train to get back to Switzerland. When they were on the platform, waiting for the train to leave, I told my grandma I had to show her something.

I showed her the picture of the beach party and of the people of our beach with the 1st prize and then said: look, here is Elisa and here I am. She then knew that, that night at least, we managed to go out without her knowing it. She had to laugh. We were never by ourselves at night, always with a group of friends and were never, at any time in any kind of danger or trouble, so maybe we did do her a favour. I was 18 when we started going out of the window, and almost 19 the last summer we went there. I knew it was going to be the last one, because I was starting my apprenticeship in August that year, and I would then only have 4 weeks holiday for the whole year. I didn't think I would take them all at once in July. The rest of the year would be very long if I did that.

My nonna was originally from the South of Italy. She was from a poor family, in a very poor region. She suffered hunger when she was growing up, which is why she always had supplies at home: coffee, olive oil, pasta, tomato sauce and soaps. I used to tease her about it, but I haven't experienced a war, nor hunger. When she was a little girl, she had to work picking olives. As a young woman, she moved to a big city in the North, Milan, to find work. She met and married my nonno. I wish I knew more about their lives.

My father's parents were both from the German part of Switzerland, but spent most of their life in the French part. They used to have a family guesthouse, then the ice cream shop. When they became too old to keep going with it, they sold it and retired. Not long after, my grandmother got sick. We first

thought it was pneumonia, but then found out it was lung cancer. She had never smoked, neither had anybody in the house. I was 14 then, and loved her very much. I used to go and visit her at least once a week (she was able to stay at home, as she wanted and received domiciliary care). I saw her condition worsen. Towards the end, I would enter her room and she'd say: if it's too hard, you don't have to stay. "But I want to be with you", I'd reply. When she passed away it was a relief for her. At her funeral, my dad and I ran out of the church in tears during the ceremony. Later there was a wake somewhere; some people had come a long way for the service. We all went there and I got upset with the other people, I could not understand how they could eat or drink when we had just said goodbye to my beloved grandmother.

That was my first confrontation with death and the loss of a loved one. I was then 14. After her death, I used to go and see my grandad about once a week to see if I could help with shopping and so on. We had never been very close; he was not a very warm person, unlike his late wife. About one year after my grandmother, he passed away too. They now rest together. He too had interesting stories, some quite scary, to tell. He used to be a truck driver with the Red Cross, and he was amongst the people who opened the concentration camps at the end of WW2. He showed me some pictures that he took. The one that impressed me most and that I can still remember all those years after was a picture of a mountain of bones. It said everything.

I can't remember exactly how my parents' divorce affected me. I missed my father when I was growing up, of course, but we lived in the same small town, so I would regularly ride my bike, once I had one, to his place in the afternoon after school. My mum was the love of his life and he never said a harsh word to her, although I unfortunately can't say the same for

my mum. He was not always paying the allowances in time and we were struggling, so my mum used to get upset with this situation and say a few things that were not very nice. I remember that once, when I was a bit older, I told her that if she wanted to say nasty things about my father, she had to wait for me to be out of the room.

My brother Luca and I were very close. We used to fight all the time as siblings do, but we adored each other. Because he was 2 years older than me, I think he suffered more from the divorce. I was too small to understand, but he understood more and was therefore more affected.

When I woke up in the middle of the night to go to the toilet, he would always escort me (I was scared of the dark).

If I had an accident and did a wee in the bed (because I was dreaming I was on the toilet), he would help me take the sheets off, put a dry pyjama on and then let me sleep in his bed with him.

One night, as we opened the bedroom door, on our way to the toilet, we saw two shiny eyes. We got the fright of our lives and screamed. Within seconds our dad was there with the light on and we discovered that the eyes belonged to Aio, a friend's dog that our dad had brought home that evening. Because we were already asleep when he arrived, we didn't know it was there.

The poor dog spent the whole day crying the following day. He was so sad he scared us. It was a boxer we knew very well for having played with it for hours and hours beforehand.

Later, after the divorce, my dad took one of his puppies as his. He named it Aio as well. It was a wonderful dog. We could do anything to him. I could put my hand in his mouth whilst he was eating a bone to take it away from him and he would let me do it.

When we went skiing, if it was flat and we had to push to get

to the lifts, I would hold the leash and Aio would pull me. He'd spend the whole day running after us downhill, and then uphill. He was exhausted by the evening.

When we went mushroom hunting, he would be with us as well, and he'd run all day again. We could trust him to find a fallen tree trunk, grab it in its mouth and run with it. We had to make sure we saw him coming to have time to jump and avoid getting the trunk at the back of our legs. I also remember that I would take him to the school grounds. When older kids teased me, I would put the leash in its mouth and pull it, as I knew he would then make scary growls. It always worked and I was left alone, although I don't think he would have hurt anyone. He was just protecting me.

He weighed about 45kg, 45kg of muscle. He was very strong, but when I was holding the leash, as if knowing, he would not pull too hard. I only went flying once, when I walked with him on the leash inside a restaurant where my dad was waiting for me. The floor was tiled and there was another dog inside. I was not quick enough to let go of the leash.

When my dad had to get rid of him and gave it to the SPA (Society for the Protection of Animals), we were all sad, but it could not be avoided.

My brother Luca was always there to protect me as we were growing up. He was so kind. I used to be quite nasty sometimes when we were very young. I would go in his room, throw some of his toys out of the window (and we didn't have many, how mean is that?). Then, before he hit me, I'd start crying. When my mum came, because I was younger, he would be the one to be told off. On the other hand, if I did something silly and my mum got upset, he would say that it was his fault, that he did it, That she should give him a smack. not me. Isn't that cute?

We were both bookworms. We didn't have money to buy

books, but we'd go to the library every week and borrow 3 or 4 or more of them, the librarians knew us, we were very regular visitors.

When we got home after school in the afternoon, we'd throw our bags on our beds and start reading. We'd only stop at dinner time and we'd quickly do our homework after dinner, quickly so we would have time to read more after.

Luckily, we were both doing quite well at school. Luca was smarter, but I was more studious and I had (and still have, a very good memory). I was very good in languages, whereas he was more the maths person. I was shocking in maths. No problem with arithmetic, but when I got to algebra, geometry and things like that, I just gave up. In high school, the maths' teacher was a sadist; he really enjoyed putting my bad marks (too often 2 out of 10) in red in my daily notebook (that parents had to sign every week). On the other hand, I was doing well in all the other subjects. I'm not a maths person, that's all.

When I didn't like dinner, my mum used to tell me that I had to sit at the table until I had eaten it all. I was very stubborn and would sit there for hours without eating. Some other times, she would send me to bed without dinner, so when there was fish, which I hated, I would sit at the dinner table for a while and then ask if I could go to bed. There was one very important and simple rule about food in the house: we didn't waste it. We got used to eating everything, at least most of the time, and when there was something we really didn't like, our mum was smart enough to not cook it too often, this way avoiding fights and lost battles.

I remember one day, after my mum had remarried. I must have been 10 or 11. I decided to surprise her when she came back from work and have lunch ready. I had no idea how to cook and was just planning to cook some pasta. The problem

was I didn't know you are supposed to put salt in the water, so I didn't. I don't know if you have ever tried pasta cooked without salt in the water, but trust me, it is disgusting.

We never had a television until much later, we couldn't afford it. When we finally had one, black and white of course, we were only allowed to watch it once a week, on Saturday night when there was a one hour cartoon programme on the Italian channel. That was a treat. We didn't mind not being allowed to watch much TV, because we would read for hours instead, and really enjoyed it.

On Wednesday afternoons, we sometimes went to our grandma's place and watched some of the kids programmes there (there was no school on Wednesday afternoon back then), but we still used to go to school on Saturdays. The only extra curricular activity we ever did was gymnastics.

I guess we never had much (I think I had only one doll in my childhood), but we were happy. I remember that when I was about 8 or 10, I got a scooter for my birthday from my dad. I could not believe my eyes. I loved it and used it all the time.

One afternoon that I was with it on the school grounds, a friend called me. I looked backwards to answer and therefore didn't see a branch in my way. It stopped my wheel and I went flying, landing on my front teeth and breaking one in the process. After that, I was a lot more careful.

My mum couldn't afford to buy bikes for us. Luca got one from our Italian aunty, a racing one and it's with that bike that I learnt to ride, all by myself in front of my grandma's house. I would stay very close to the wall so that I would not fall. When I was able to go all the way without seeming to fall, I let go of the wall, and went. That was it, I could ride. Then my aunty also bought a bike for me. That was great (I was then able to ride to my dad's place whenever I wanted to, which I did on a regular basis). We never had birthday parties either. Instead,

on our birthday, we could choose what we wanted for tea. I always chose the same, pork fillet with morel mushroom in a cream sauce. I now cook it for my children who also like it very much, but they get a lot more than we used to.

When I was 14, I started to work during school holidays in a nursing home, so that I could earn some money and buy the brand of jeans I wanted, as well as discs, have some pocket money and save for my scooter. I certainly learnt the value of money.

Our dad used to take us for the day during the weekend. We'd go skiing in winter, mushroom hunting in autumn, and various other things at other times. He had many friends who did rallies, so we also used to go and watch them and then have a barbeque. Quite often, he would be late bringing us back in the evening, which upset my mum as she would worry, because he was a bit of a drinker.

We used to spend Christmas Eve at our grandma's place with my father's side of the family, and we'd then go to Italy to spend Xmas day with my mum's family. After a long lunch, as is often the case in Italy, we might go for a walk in the city if it was not too cold, but very often, we would just play tombola (Italian bingo). My nonna used to keep all the small coins and had a box full of them. She would give us some, so we could buy our cards (10 liras each). We'd play for hours, it was fun. She was always winning. We knew our numbers very well...

On Xmas Eve, before we were allowed to open the presents, we had to stand by the Xmas tree and say a poem or sing a song. I remember that we also always stood by the window, waiting for the snow to come, and it did, every Xmas Eve of my childhood.

Every Christmas Eve we would eat the same food; a ham off the bone with a corn and pineapple salad and pasta or

rice. My grandma also made special cookies. She made them only once a year for Christmas. I used to call them the black cookies, because they are dark brown (chocolate cookies, of course). I still have the recipe that I wrote down many years ago, in my childish handwriting and with spelling mistakes. I also usually make them for Christmas, although they are a lot of work and never turn out as good as my grandma's. The thing is you have to beat 6 egg whites stiff and then add roasted almonds and chocolate and mix very carefully so the whites don't come down. Well, mine always do and I end up with very flat cookies, but they taste delicious nevertheless.

At Easter or around Carnival, my grandma used to make "marvels". They were delicious, but this is a recipe I never asked for and it is therefore lost.

My mum used to make the best ever hot chocolate in winter. It was so thick, a real treat. She also made special dough and then deep fried spoons of it. They came out in all sorts of weird shapes. You then just add icing sugar. They're yum.

A special treat for dinner in autumn was to have chestnuts roasted in the fire with whipped cream. Not a very balanced diet, but once per autumn is not too bad. I have already mentioned the pork fillet with creamy mushroom sauce.

In the weeks preceding Xmas, we would go to the department store with our grandma, and she would give us some money so that we could buy a present for our mum and dad. She was very sweet (and we also always had some we made ourselves).

Before Christmas, Santa used to come to the local supermarket with a present for the kids. The present was a face washer and it came with an orange and a gingerbread man.

We always went to see him of course and we were even a bit cheeky. We lived very close to the shop, so we'd go once,

then quickly go home put the things down, get changed and maybe change hairdo (put it up or down, depending on how it was the first time), maybe put some glasses on, and then go back to see Santa again. He never recognised us and we were able to do that 2–3 times every Christmas. I guess tricking Santa was as much fun as managing to get extra oranges and gingerbreads.

A few pet stories

At one stage, we had a pet black cat, Bagheera (from the *Jungle Book*). She used to sit on the window in the kitchen to watch the world from the 4th floor. One day when my mum was very upset with me and shouting, Bagheera got scared and, from the kitchen table, jumped to the window, as she did all the time. That time, though, she jumped too far, missed the sill and went flying from the 4th floor. Luca and I quickly ran to the yard to rescue her. She was a bit scared, but otherwise fine. I think after that she made sure she calculated her jump correctly.

Another time, we kept a hedgehog for a few days that we had found in the garden.

We also had a friend's python, Nonine, on board for a few weeks. I brought it to school for show and tell.

Our first ever pet, though, was a turtle, Seraphine. We had been told that they hibernate, so put it in the cellar with a bit of lettuce at the beginning of winter. When we went back in spring, we were very surprised and sad to see that she was not waking up. We kept pushing her, calling her name, but there was no reaction. The problem is that we left it in the cellar for too long. When we went to get it, it had dried up.

Much later, after we moved to the chalet, we got another pet, a black kitten that we called Minette. When we got the kitten, we thought it was a male, so called it Felix. We only found

out it was a female when she got pregnant.

She was the cleverest cat I have ever seen. She would literally talk to us. She would also walk me to the train station and she would be there again when I came back (although the time of my return was different almost every day). She was the only one to notice when I started to smoke joints. She would then talk to me even more than usual (and she never dobbed on me). My mum learnt by an anonymous phone call, and she was not happy. I came home that night and my mum confronted me. So, you are using drugs she said. I had to admit I smoked a joint here and there, but nothing serious.

That reminds me of another awful experience. Once, when I was about 13–14, I saw lollies in a shop. I had just a couple of dollars to buy the beef stock my mum had asked me to buy. The beef stock was the same price as the lollies, but smaller, so I stole it to have money to buy the lollies. As I was leaving the shop, I was stopped and asked for my docket. I had one for the lollies, but not for the stock, of course. They brought me to the office. I was in tears. It was the first time ever I had stolen anything. I was so ashamed. And yes, I never did it again. I pleaded with them to not tell my mum and they said they wouldn't. I then had to run all the way to the train station in order to not miss the last train.

Luca was in it, so I sat with him and told him everything. He said not to worry too much. If they didn't say anything, it would be ok (he was a bit of an Arsene Lupin,—“a gentleman thief”, himself), but unlike me, he was smart enough to never get caught. We got home, had dinner, then, when it was time, got ready for bed. I wished everybody a goodnight and went to bed to read for a while. Not long after my mum came in, sat on the edge of the bed, looked at me in the eyes and asked if I had anything to say. No, no, I said. Sure?? She carried on, so I burst into tears and told her what had happened. She

knew already. They had called her, those bastards and liars. She asked me why I did it. I said I had seen the lollies and really wanted them, but I had no money to buy them. From that day, I started to receive a little pocket money every week. What a lesson that was. If everybody got caught the very first time they steal anything, there would be a lot less thieves around, that's for sure.

My mum remarried when I was 9 and from then on I had a stepfather to fight with. I remember that as a teenager it was hard, because he didn't want to let me go out with my friends, and told me I was an idiot every time I opened my mouth. It was even worse with my brother. When I was 14, we moved from our small town to go and live in our chalet up in the mountains, 1250m above sea level. It was hard because all my friends were in town.

Not long after Luca had had enough and he moved out. I found myself all alone up in the mountains. We had spent all our childhood being very close and I missed him a lot. We stayed in touch, but it was not the same as living under the same roof.

About a year after Luca moved out, my mum had another child, my little brother, Francois. I was 15 when he was born, and he was a bit like my son. I used to look after him at least one afternoon every week, so that my mum could go and do the shopping. I enjoyed that, although at one stage he would start crying as my mum went out the door and not stop until she came back. We found a way to trick him and my mum would put him down for a nap and leave while he was asleep. When he woke up, he was quite happy to be with me.

I used to go for long walks with him in the pram, play with him, and help give him a bath and so on.

I got used to feed him, change nappies, comfort him and I am sure that if I was so calm with my first born child and never

panicked, it was thanks to the experience acquired while I looked after him when he was a baby. Looking after him when he was a baby also brought us very close, as well as taking him for the day or the weekend when he was older and I had left home. We might go skiing, to the Luna park, or whatever. It was always fun. I allowed him stay up late...

Luckily, there were a few other kids up in the mountain, not many living there all year round, most of them coming for the weekends only. It was not too bad though, because during the week I was busy with school, going up and down the mountain every day.

In the weekend, we would spend hours playing together at the nearby farm, bringing the cows into the stables in the late afternoon, riding a bike on the dirt tracks in the forest and so on. We used to spend hours in the fields picking flowers that we would then sell at the train station.

It was great in winter, because I could put my skis on at home and not take them off until the end of the day when I skied back through the forest all the way to the door of the chalet. I was skiing all the time, rain, snow, wind, sun, every weekend, as well as in the afternoon when there was no school. I had a pass for the season, which was not cheap, but well worth it with the amount of skiing I did (there was not much else to do up there in winter).

In hindsight, it was not a bad place to spend some of those silly teenage years, away from city temptations and very close to Mother Nature. I was therefore quite innocent for a long time.

In winter, I always had a spare pair of shoes with me. I'd need my boots to get to the train station, but would look silly (I thought) with them in town, so I would leave them for the day at the train station (they knew me) and get them in the evening before catching the train to go home.

I remember coming home one night. It had been snowing most of the day. I got off the train and started walking home, which was not easy with all the snow. I had almost reached our place when I encountered an obstacle: mountains of snow that had accumulated against some timber in front of the neighbour's place. There was so much that I could not walk anymore. I thought about lying in the snow and going to sleep, but then realised that I would probably die if I did that, so found some more strength and literally swam through the snow. I was a bit of a mess when I got home and very much appreciated the fire in the chimney. I literally melted standing by it to warm up and made a big puddle on the carpet.

In summer, I had the little scooter I had worked hard to buy, with some help from my parents. I used it to get to town and school, and that made me a bit more independent, not having to rely on the not too many trains available. The trip from town to our place took about 40 minutes uphill, mainly through the woods on a slow scooter, so slow I sometimes had to help pedalling, and I'd have neck pain by the time I got home. I once ran out of petrol on my way home and had to push it all the way home, uphill through dark and scary woods.

Downhill was a lot faster, maybe 15 minutes and I obviously had a few falls. I remember that when I was studying at the "CESSEV" (Centre d'Enseignement Secondaire Supérieur de l'Est Vaudois, some sort of college) I would go to my friend Francine's place first and we'd then go together. I often got there with a knee bleeding or something else and she used to wait for me with bandaids and disinfectant ready.

I was only able to use my scooter in summer. In winter, I had to rely on the train again. When I was about 17-18, I used to go and sleep at my grandmother's place regularly (my stepfather's mother). I would go there after school, spend a few hours with her, have dinner and then go out for a few hours, maybe

see my boyfriend and spend some time with him. When my stepfather called and asked to talk to me, she would always make up excuses for me: she's in the bath, in the toilet, already asleep, whatever she could think of, until he lost patience and, as he said "forbid me from staying at the draught's hotel". Well, I enjoyed it while it lasted.

I was a bit of a rebel, a bit wild as a late teenager. I still remember the very first time I smoked a joint. I had a girlfriend who smoked regularly. She had been offering me to try for a while. I was not interested for a long time and then, by curiosity, decided to try. She told me that it does not have much effect the first time, so made me smoke almost the whole joint. I left her place, without noticing anything special until I got in the lift. I was then going half way home with my scooter, and would then catch the train. Because of the joint, on my scooter, I had the impression I was going very very fast. I kept slowing down and must have gone really slow, because I managed to miss the train.

Luckily, the postman was at the train station. He told me I had missed the train and then offered to drive me a bit further to catch up with it, and we did.

Francine landed in my class coming from South Africa when I was 14. She was sitting next to me and we quickly became friends.

We used to escape the school grounds during geography lessons (the teacher was a bit weak and all the children took advantage of it). We'd run home, then come back and be very silly in class, pretending to be drunk, when we had not had a single sip of alcohol in our life yet. The teacher thought we had though and it was fun shocking him.

A few years later, we started wagging school here and there to do something more fun. (When we were studying at that college, (CESSEV) we started Spanish lessons. We never got

hooked, though and spent more time in the cafeteria, talking (some knowledge of Spanish would have been useful when I started travelling in South America...).

We had quite a few adventures together and became very close over the years, especially during and after our study trip to Corsica. We wanted to go to Madrid, but there were no spots left.

So we thought Corsica would do. There were 2 groups for Corsica: the walkers and the strollers. We decided to go in the second group because we didn't want to walk 10 hours a day. We were supposed to camp there for a week.

We got to the campsite the first night; looked at each other and realised we did not have a tent. Luckily, one of the teachers had supervised the equipment and made sure there would be enough for everyone. So we got the tent that was going to be ours for a week and organised it with some help from friends. We just made a little mistake. We were camping on the beach and we put the front facing the water instead of the other way and our tent almost blew away in the middle of the night.

We were very unlucky during this trip and had terrible weather. Our tent was taking water and we spent a week never having anything really dry to put on. We got a bit grumpy by the end of our stay.

I remember one evening. We were cooking under a bridge by the stream, to be out of the rain. The meat was so tough it was almost impossible to eat (you had to bite it, hold it with both hands and pull very hard to tear it). When I looked at the stream, I saw our mashed potatoes float by. We had to laugh. We nevertheless enjoyed the beauty of this island and I have since gone back twice, in summer, of course.

When I was doing the pilgrimage, my friend Francine was the person I would call once a week to let her know what I

was up to. She would then update all my friends.

When we were in our early twenties we went to South Africa together. We were planning to go just the two of us, but then found out that her dad and some friends were going so decided to join them. It was a good idea, for safety reasons, I guess, but also because that way we saw a lot more than we would have by ourselves. It was the first time I took a plane, pretty late, but I have since caught up.

Francine was the matron of honour at my wedding; she made the trip from Switzerland.

When I was a teenager, my stepfather kept telling me that I was stupid, which is very bad when your self esteem is not that great anyway. I almost believed him, since I was not too confident at that stage, but I then decided to prove him wrong and did a few things with that in mind?

2

HOPES AND DREAMS

WHEN I WAS a little girl, growing up, I wanted to become a criminal lawyer (for lost causes, of course), a nurse, or a photo-reporter to travel the world, take pictures and write articles. Later, I didn't want to go to university and study anymore, I wanted to work and earn some money, so that was the end of the lawyer career.

I started working in nursing homes during the school holidays when I was only 14, and although it was not always easy, I enjoyed it. I always tried to spend some time just talking to the patients, or holding their hand comforting them, which very often was what they needed most. I enjoyed caring for others and that's when I thought I could become a nurse, with the idea of going to Africa or else with a "missionary" to help where it was most needed.

It can be quite sad to work in a nursing home. Some of the patients are completely left to themselves by their family, with no one ever visiting. What an awful way to spend the last part of your life. We used to be a bit cheeky to cheer up. We'd have wheelchair races in the corridors and things like that. The patients enjoyed hearing us laugh, it probably reminded them

of happier times.

We had a few funny experiences. One day, A Swiss German girl was asked to clean all the dentures of all the patients on the floor. She collected them in a bucket and cleaned them, but then didn't know who they belonged to, so the poor patients had to try denture after denture until all of them found their rightful owners again.

I used to get to work a bit later than the others in the morning, because the first train arrived too late. I got there, found out who my patients were, then went to the room of the first one to give him a wash and get him breakfast. When he was ready, sitting on his armchair with his breakfast, he desperately tried to tell me something. I fed him his 2 slices of bread, butter and jam, as he kept trying to tell me something. I just could not understand him. After he had finished, I went to the sink to get the face washer, and suddenly understood. His teeth were in the glass on the sink. He had been trying to tell me to give them to him all that time (eating would have been easier, I was so sorry).

In the afternoon, between 1 and 4pm, there were only 3-4 of us on the floor. One afternoon, I was at the nurses' station with the others when we heard someone calling for help from the dining room. The nurses sent me to have a look. When I got there, I had to laugh. There was a little old lady in an armchair and a little old man leaning over her with his tweezers and pulling hairs off her nose. "You will be more beautiful", he was telling her, but she was not convinced. It was funny, though.

I also used to dream about becoming a writer. I have always liked reading and writing.

I guess out of all those dreams I have achieved a few. I never became a photo-reporter but nevertheless travelled the world. For the writing, I guess that's what I am doing now. As far as the photo part of it is concerned, it's never too late and

I have thousands of pictures of my trip around the world and other previous travels that I have now scanned and saved on DVDs. It is easy to show them and they take little space (I got rid of the originals). If this work ever gets published, I'd like it to come with a CD-ROM containing a selection of my pictures from around the world.

Never mind the nurse and lawyer ideas. You can't do everything.

When I was 17, after finishing the mandatory school and when I was still studying in that sort of "college", the CESSEV (Centre d'Enseignement Secondaire Supérieur de l'Est Vaudois), I applied to one of the nursing schools in Switzerland. I passed the exams, but they refused to take me because I was too young (you had to be at least 18) this was a big blow for me, the first failure of my life, my entrance to the world of grown-ups I guess.

My family was very supportive, even my stepfather, and he was the one to suggest I do a commercial apprenticeship, because it is a good basis. I did that with the multinational company Nestle, whose international headquarters happen to be in my home town.

I was lucky to get in, because I never got their letter inviting me for the tests until the day after they had taken place. I called the person responsible in the Human Resources department and explained my problem, when he heard that I was doing that college and planning to get my diploma, he asked me for my marks in English. They were good so he accepted to see me the following day for the tests, although they had had over 100 people already and were only going to take 14. I ended up being one of them. Because of that "college" I had done after the mandatory school, I was 2 years older than most of the others and they appreciated my "maturity", as well as my knowledge of English.

I worked and studied hard during my 3 year apprenticeship, especially the second year, because I had been told the company would send the best apprentice to the UK for 6 months and I wanted that person to be me. I finished the second year with a general average of 5.85 (out of a maximum of 6), pretty good indeed. At the beginning of the 3rd year, I was told that they had changed their mind about the 6 months stay in the UK. I was very disappointed and stopped studying but I nevertheless finished amongst the best in the country, with an average of 5.5. I also got the first prize for my work, one way to prove my stepfather wrong.

I was chosen to give a speech to the CEO. Knowing that soon I would not be an apprentice anymore, but an employee, and that there were therefore a few things I would not be able to do anymore, I decided to have one last crazy hair do. I had very short hair then, with geometrical shapes made with the shaver, so I added red and blue streaks, just in time for the speech. The CEO was not too shocked, (he actually told me it was an interesting hair do), but the head of the Human Resources Department was fuming.

During my apprenticeship, I decided that I too had had enough of my stepfather. In my second year, I was paid \$500 / month, so my father stopped paying an allowance. My stepfather wanted me to contribute to the household expenses, which I thought was fair enough. The problem was he wanted most of my salary and I still needed some money.

I was not earning enough to make a living, so my father and I decided I would live with him for a while. On the day of my 19th birthday, I left my mum's house to go and live with my father in Montreux. I will always remember my little brother, Francois, then only 4 years old, seeing me take all my things and load them in a friend's car, asking me where I was going and when I would be back. I was in tears when I replied that I

would not come back.

A few days later, I spent a big part of my monthly salary to send flowers to my mum, with a note that I loved her. She kept them long after they had dried up.

Going to my dad's was a bit of a betrayal for her (first my brother, then I when she had brought us up by herself for all those years). I explained it had nothing to do with her; I just could not live with my stepfather anymore. I think she understood.

3

MORE EXPERIENCES AND ADVENTURES

I HAVE ALWAYS as far as I can remember had a huge need for love (maybe because my parents divorced when I was only 3, and because my mum never actually said that she loved me)?? (I knew she did, of course, but it would have been nice to be told so, to hear it). This is probably why from late teenage years on I kept falling in love. I just wanted to be loved. I got married when I was just 20 to Hermes (the messenger of the Gods in Greek mythology) whom I had met on a train, when I was going to Italy to spend the weekend with my family there. There was a strike and we got stuck in the middle of nowhere for hours, talking. He was very honest with me and told me he was a drug addict on his way to Milan to buy heroin. He was quite handsome and seemed pretty smart so I thought: "what a waste". I gave him my nonna's phone number and told him to call if he wanted to go for a drink or catch up. He called, not to meet then, but to tell me that he would come visit me in Switzerland the following weekend. I had the soul of a St Bernard (mountain rescue dog)... so I decided to do what I could to help him get out of drugs. He came the following weekend, and the one after I went to his

place (where he lived with his parents and his brother). It became obvious quickly that for him to give up drugs he would have to move somewhere else, away from his usual circle (all his friends were drug addicts too).

We decided to get married, because we were in love, of course, and because that way he could come and live with me in Switzerland. The day we got married, I had the feeling I was making a big mistake, but I thought I had gone past the point of no return... Needless to say that my family was not exactly thrilled about my marriage (it was not really what they had been dreaming for me and I was very young). My father was very upset with me and that's when we stopped talking to each other...(I remember that my mum was there when we got out of the marriage celebrant's office and she told me that if the marriage turned out to be a success, she would never be able to forgive herself had she not come).

Unfortunately, very soon after we got married, things changed. The night we got out with all my apprenticeship friends to celebrate our diplomas (only about 4 months after we got married), he became physically violent with me for no reason and threw me in a bush.

That was the first of many crises. Not long after, we rented a one bedroom apartment. There were quite a few times when he was getting violent and I would be scared and shout. Although there were many other flats in the building and people must have heard me, nobody ever did anything.

I remember that once I heard the girl on the floor above us shout and I went there rang the bell to find out what was happening and told her partner that if I heard her shout again, I would call the police. They calmed down and I didn't need to do it, but I would have.

Hermes also became very jealous of everything and every-

one and managed to get back into drugs in Switzerland. I remember that once, he took all my salary and left for Italy. I should have given up then, but I didn't. I hitchhiked to get to his parents place and brought him back. If I had let go then, I would have avoided a lot of grief.

He also became violent with me (mainly in words). He never physically hurt me, but he did a lot of damage to my mind and I ended up very scared of him. The day that he sat on me with a knife to my throat I thought he had gone too far and decided to apply for a divorce.

He was shocked and very sad, because he loved me, I am actually sure he really did. He tried to make me change my mind because of that, but something in me was broken and it could not be repaired. He said he would change, but by then I was afraid of him and you can't build a deep and lasting relationship on fear.

He had to agree to the divorce as it would have been granted anyway, I had a few reasons to ask for it in the first place, so he signed all the papers and a few weeks later went back to his parents' place in Italy. One week passed and his mother and brother came. They were hoping that I would change my mind, because ever since I had entered the picture, they had seen me as "salvation" for their son when they were about to give up hope, tired of struggling with him for many years. It was very hard for me to tell them that it was too late; I had made up my mind and would not change it.

The time before Hermes agreed to divorce was very hard for me. He was playing with my mind and abusing me.

In order to remain sane, I contacted my dear friend Fabrice. I needed to have someone to talk to, a shoulder to cry on. I started seeing him about once a week for a couple of hours. We spent many hours lying on the floor, listening to music and talking. I was able to talk about everything and get it off my

chest. I was able to cry and see better where to go from there, and, above all, I was able to relax.

Without planning it, we became lovers. I had 2 weeks holiday between the job I had just quitted and my new one. He was moving, so I went to his place one day to help him pack. I was sitting on the floor in the lounge, wrapping china in newspaper. He sat behind me; I leant on him to have a rest. He kissed me and that was the beginning.

He had no influence in my decision to divorce and did not want to have any. He was just being my friend. He helped me see clear, realise that I could not go on like that, and have the courage to do what needed to be done. We did not get together after that, not until years later. He helped me have the courage to take the first step.

Hermes left to go back to Italy, but not straight away, so I moved in at my brother's place for a while, because by then I was scared to stay with Hermes, scared he might end up harming me. I stayed with my brother for a few months before finding a new flat.

That was the first of many times I would move in with him for a while.

He was always there to help me in hardship or when I needed a roof for a while, to have time to settle down. First when I decided to apply for a divorce.

A few years later, when Fabrice and I split up, while I was looking for a flat.

And again when I came back from my trip around the world, to give me time to get a job and find a flat. I could always count on him.

I remember many years ago, after I had split up with Fabrice again and found a new flat. He didn't have much money and I couldn't be bothered to cook for myself.

We had a wonderful arrangement. I would buy all the gro-

ceries and he would come to my place every evening and cook. We would have a chat while he was cooking and while eating together and then he would go and let me study my courses until late in the night, and then be back the following day. It was great.

After a few months, he met his girlfriend (Catherine), and we stopped our daily dinners together, but then I used to go to their place at least once a week and he would always cook my favourite dishes.

I only heard from Hermes once more, not long after he had left. He called me at work and wanted to see me, but the wound was too fresh and I refused. He said he was going in a centre for detoxication and I hope that he managed to get it out of his system. He was not a bad person...

I remember thinking, back then, that when I would have children, I would know how to talk about drugs to them... I now have kids, still a lot too young to be confronted to that problem yet, but will I be able to talk to them about drugs when the time comes? We will see...Hermes injected himself in front of me once. He then collapsed and I was very scared. I thought he was going to die and there was nothing I could do. Luckily after a while he regained consciousness and I made him swear to never do that to me again.

Some adventures with cars and others (not in chronological order)

I went for my driving license as soon as I was legally allowed to, not long after turning 18. I did most of my driving with friends. Once, as we were crossing Montreux in a big traffic jam, I was struggling a bit with the clutch, and I actually "hopped" through the city, until I had had enough, stopped the car and got out, letting its owner take over. I only took a

few hours with a driving school, to make sure I did not have too many wrong habits already and to go to the test with a car from a driving school. I had a few things that needed to be corrected, like looking very far ahead, but on the whole, I was not too bad. We then had to train for the parking part of the test. I was ok with normal parking, but not that much with the parallel parking. With the instructor we spent quite a few hours practicing, and ended up having an argument. He told me that I had simply decided that I couldn't park that way. He said I was an idiot, and that pushed me to prove him wrong and, from that day on, I was able to do a parallel parking. Maybe I needed him to abuse me? When he thought I was ready, we made the appointment for the test. On the day, we drove together to where the test was taking place. He then left me with the "expert". I first had to do the parking. Although I had by then become quite confident, I panicked when I had to do the parallel one. There was a pole at the front, one at the back and I had to park in between, of course. It was on a bit of a slope, which I think is why I panicked (I had only practiced on a flat road...). I started my parking, looked very carefully at the front to make sure I would not touch the pole. When I thought I was ready to put the car straight, I did so, but just delicately touched the pole at the back in the process. I then knew I would have to come back and that they would not give me my license. I was disappointed and crying when we left for the driving part in the city. I passed that without any problem. When we got back where we had started, I was told that I was ok for the driving in the city part of the exam, but that I would have to come again for the parking. I made the appointment then and there for the following month.

One month later, I went back.—I just had to do the parking. I was extremely careful with the back this time, so forgot to check the front properly and made the pole at the front

literally fly away (at least this time it was worth failing...). The first time I failed I cried, the second, I could not stop laughing. I made yet another appointment for the following month. The third time I went, I made sure I checked both front and back properly and parked without trouble. Yes, I had a driving license. It took me 3 attempts, but I got there. If I had failed again, I would have had to see a psychologist, which is how it works in Switzerland in such a case.

It felt strange, at the beginning to drive by myself. I was not used to being alone in the car yet. I was using my dad's car. One night, I went to the next town for my evening English class. I got there, parked the car and got ready to go when I noticed a bad smell of burning. I had driven from Montreux to Vevey (about 4km) with the hand brake on. Luckily, it was not very tight and I never noticed anything until I stopped and smelled the burning. I never made that mistake again.

Another night, in winter, I was driving home from a friend's place. The fog was so thick that I could not see the front of the car. I got scared, found a safe place to stop and decided to wait for the fog to lift. It did eventually, but I spent quite a few hours in the car waiting.

Another time, when I was driving home after work, I got stuck in the traffic in Montreux. It finally moved again. I was checking the terrace of a pub to see if my friends were there when the light turned red and the cars in front stopped. Luckily, I looked ahead just in time to brake and stop. I was a bit agitated, put the first gear in to be ready when the light turned green, and I was, but I left going backwards... I had put the rear gear instead of the first. Just as well my friends were not there, I was mortified.

One evening, I drove to a friend's place. There was only one tiny spot where to park, parallel, of course. I stayed very calm and started manoeuvring. Not good enough, I had to start

again. I tried a few times and then started to be upset. I had 2 choices: either manage to park the car somehow, or go back home and forget about catching up with my friend. I didn't really want to go home. I saw a man coming my way on the footpath, so I got out of the car and asked him if he would be so nice as to park the car for me. He was very nice indeed and did, so that I was able to spend the evening with my friend.

I used to drive my dad to work every morning. One day, we were on the motorway when I noticed smoke coming out of the bonnet and the accelerator pedal not responding anymore. I stopped on the emergency lane. We had a look and had to call the TCS (Swiss road assistance). I actually managed, in a short period, to ruin my dad's car. No one ever told me that you have to check the oil level, so I never did and seized the engine as a result. I was putting petrol, as a matter of course, but I had no idea about the oil. From that day, I went back to my scooter, which was better, because it was summer. My dad and I lived in Montreux and during the Montreux Jazz Festival, the road would be just one big traffic jam and it would take me 45 minutes to get home, whereas it took me only 5 to 10 with my scooter. (With it, I could overtake all the stopped cars on the right).

In over 20 years of driving, I had two minor accidents, but it was never my fault and it was never serious.

The first one happened when I was coming home from work one evening. I was driving normally and suddenly felt a shock, as if I had driven in a hole. I kept going for a few hundred meters then stopped on the side to have a look at my car. There was a fair bit of damage, I walked back to see where I had driven and understand what had happened. I found a huge hole in the middle of the road. It had been signalled, but, because it was very windy that night, with winds peaking at 150

km /hour, the signals had fallen, and were lying on the road. I called the police and waited for them to arrive. I actually stood in the hole to signal it to other drivers. When the police came it was quite funny, because had I not been in the hole they would have gone right through it too. They took my details and so on and explained the procedure to follow to claim the city council, which I did of course. It took them a long time to pay me. I couldn't have the car repaired before getting the money (that's when I used to hitchhike to get to work).

The second one happened one night, as I was going out for dinner with my partner (I think it was my birthday). We were driving to Lausanne on the road that follows the lake. We were on a very long straight part, not driving fast. There was a petrol station a bit ahead and I saw a car getting ready to get into the traffic. He had to give way to us since he was getting into the traffic, and he could not not have seen us, but he didn't give way, idiot. Luckily I was not coming fast, I braked and I almost managed to stop before hitting his passenger door. He came out and excused himself. He knew it was his fault. He lived close by so we went to his place to exchange details. He gave me his business card; he was a director in a bank. He also had a beautiful house on the lake. My poor car had suffered (and so had his brand new Mercedes). Mine was a write off and the insurance company was only giving me about \$2,800 for it. It was not enough to buy a replacement car. I was annoyed. My car was old, but it was a good little car and I needed it. I wrote the man a letter explaining my problem. He was very kind and sent me a cheque for \$500 (he didn't have to do that). I was then able to buy another car and only had to put the small difference between the money from the insurance plus the \$500 the man gave me, and the price of the car.

I once went skiing with some friends in nearby France where

they lived. I was spending the weekend at their place. On Saturday morning, it was beautiful and sunny, so we decided to go skiing (by then I was no longer skiing, but snowboarding instead). We packed our gear, got dressed and we were off. I took no money with me. I did not have French Francs and we had agreed that they would pay for me and I'd reimburse them in Swiss Francs once we were back. We had a beautiful day, enjoying the sun and the very good skiing conditions. On our last downhill run of the day, I lost sight of them for a few minutes. So I just kept going to catch up with them. I knew we were going to stop soon after. As I was nearing the bottom of the valley, I suddenly had a doubt; it didn't look familiar at all. Had I made a wrong turn? Oh yes I had and I went down the wrong side of the mountain. This would not have been a problem in the middle of the day, as I would just have taken the lift up and come down on the other side. The problem was that it was the end of the day. They had already stopped the lifts and couldn't turn them on for me again. Not only because it takes a lot of power, but also because the people checking the slopes at the end of the day (before they close to make sure nobody is lost or has fallen and is in trouble) had already done their job. If something happened to me I would spend the night there. I started to panic. What was I going to do? I had no money, no way of reaching my friends. I explained my problem to a guy who told me that there was a bus going to the other side. It had already left and the next one was not leaving for a few hours. I saw a taxi and went to talk to the driver. I explained what had happened and asked him to drive me to the other side. Once we find them, my friends will pay you. If we don't find them there, you will have to drive me to their place and I will then be able to pay you myself. He was kind and agreed. I think he saw on my face how desperate I was. I never doubted that my friends would be looking for me,

but how could they guess what had happened. As we were going downhill, I was checking all the cars coming up. Sure enough, not too long after, we saw my friends. They were very relieved to find me too. They paid the taxi, I jumped in their car and we were on our way home. We laugh a lot about this adventure now, but we certainly didn't laugh that day.

When I came back from my trip around the world, in 1994, I found out that all my friends had given up skiing and were snowboarding instead. I decided it could be fun to try and learn. That winter, I rented all the gear. I first tried at the ski resort where I used to live. I started at the very easy, complete beginners ride. The snow was very wet and heavy that day. I was with my little brother who was a bit of a champion. I had no idea what to do. He gave me some quick explanations and left me to it, while enjoying harder slopes. I tried and tried and tried. I barely managed to stand up and move about a meter before falling again. I was quickly soaking wet. I got a little better and Francois told me to follow him to the other lift that brings you to all the slopes at the top. Getting to the lift should be ok, I thought. Hard, but I should make it. I did, falling many times in the process. The problem was that the other lift is very steep and hard. I should never have agreed. We eventually got there. I tried to take the lift to go up. It's very quick at the start. Although they put it to the minimum for me, I knew that even if I managed the first part, I wouldn't get to the top, because the end is very hard. I still could not start anyway, so I told my brother not to worry, to enjoy his day. I would walk home and see him in the afternoon back at the chalet. He was sorry for me, so organised the machine that prepares the slopes to come down and get me (just as well we were locals). They did, and brought me to the train station at the top. Only my little brother could have made me do what I did that day. For it was complete madness. I had to try though; I

couldn't disappoint my little brother like that. I kept trying for the whole season, and was managing not too bad by the end of winter, but nowhere near as good as I was with my skis. It's a completely different feeling and I enjoyed it, as I enjoyed noticing that I was getting better, whereas with skiing I was not improving anymore. I ended up buying my own gear. I even bought a NESCAFÉ snowboard through work.

After my dad passed away, I got a small inheritance. I paid off my debt. With the money left, I decided to buy a car, not new, but almost. I saw a nice red Peugeot 205 GTI and bought it for \$11,000. That's the 1st and only time I bought a new car and spent that much money on a consumable item.

Not too long after that, I moved in with Fabrice. He had a VW GTI. We quickly realised that 2 such cars in a young couple was silly, we didn't need that and it was costing us a lot of money in insurance and so on, money that we could spend more wisely, so we decided to sell mine and replace it with a cheap second hand one. We did, but unfortunately to someone who was a crook, who sold it to someone else but never paid it to me. When I put charges against him, I found out that he was a real crook, with over 1 million dollars in debts. I was obviously at the bottom of the list, being his latest victim, and it looked very unlikely that I would ever see my money again. My mistake was to be too trusting. I gave him the car and the papers. I should have held on to the papers until he paid for it. Learn from your mistakes... I'm not that trusting anymore. That time, I lost about \$10,000. Not good. Well, I felt better in my skin than I would have in his though. I put charges against him, went to court and almost felt sorry for him. Even if he worked all his life, he would never be able to reimburse all the money he owed. I lost money, that's not good, but, it's only money and I learnt my lesson.

I used to live very close to the market place in the small town where I was born, and that's where I used to park my car. I just had to remember that the markets were on on Tuesday and Saturday morning and the night before, make sure I parked the car in the little area that was not used by the market stalls. One Monday night, I forgot and parked anywhere on the square. The next morning at 6 o'clock, I got a call from the police telling me that I had to move my car. I will be right there I said. I put a coat on top of my pyjamas and went out in the cold winter morning to move my car. The police were very nice to call me. They could have simply towed my car away and I would have then had to pay a few hundred dollars to get it back. I was grateful.

I had other weird adventures, related to cars.

When, I was working in the marketing department of one of the 3 big Swiss Banks, in Geneva, not long after finishing my apprenticeship, it meant a 1 hour drive in the morning and one in the evening. I had a few adventures on my way to work. One morning, as I was driving under a bridge, a rock hit my windscreen and broke it. I stopped in the next rest area to check the damage and call for road assistance, the TCS. They told me that there was not much they could do anyway and that I would have to have a new windscreen. When the man came, he completely broke what was left of the windscreen and removed all the glass debris. He then asked if I had sunglasses. I did so he suggested I use them to avoid getting glass in my eyes and sent me off. It must have been funny to see me in my windscreen-less car with black glasses at 7 o'clock in the morning, but I got to work with no more trouble, just a few laughs, especially from the guards when I arrived at the bank. Another morning, I got in my car, closed the door, and... the glass of my window disappeared in the door. I went like that and got to work with a very messy hairdo

as I had a very windy ride, a lot windier, in fact, than without a windscreen. On the way back, one night, my gear box gave up and I had to hold the gears in or they would keep coming out, and another time I had a hole in my radiator and had to stop all the time to fill it with coolant. Yes, you have guessed right, it was quite an old car, my very first car...

It didn't bother me too much to live 1 hour away from work, but since I had to find a flat anyway, because I did not want to stay in the apartment Hermes and I had shared during our short marriage, I decided to move a bit closer. I found a nice flat in Rolle, about 20 minutes from work. The previous tenants were selling most of their furniture, so I got a loan of 20,000 Swiss Francs to buy it, one of some silly things I did.... (Although I still have most things almost 20 years down the track). After that, I was a bit in strife, because the rent was expensive and I also had to pay back my loan, so, even though I had a good salary, I was struggling. I also had an accident with my car (drove through a big hole as mentioned before), nothing serious, but I couldn't afford to have it repaired, so I used to hitchhike to get to work, not very reliable... but it worked. I just had to make sure I left early enough to get there on time. It did not take me too long to meet someone who was going to Geneva to work everyday and who offered to come and get me at the entrance of my building. He would then drop me in front of the bank, and also gave me a ride back quite often. It was not too bad.

My family was wonderful after the divorce, very supportive, completely on my side and there to help. They could have told me that they had warned me but they were great and never did that at all, not even my step father.

I slowly put my life back together and a few months later was in for another shock. My father, to whom I had not talked

to for 2 years because of Hermes, died. I still vividly remember my mum calling to let me know. It was a beautiful sunny summer Sunday morning. The night before, I had gone out with some friends and, as if sensing something, got a bit drunk. When my mum called, I was surprised to hear her voice (she usually called me at work). I could not believe what she was saying and wanted to know why (he took his life). It was strange because he was putting his life back together and doing pretty well. He had a job, a partner and had stopped drinking. He was getting to the end of the tunnel and then learnt that he was becoming blind because of some chemical he had been using years earlier when it was not known that it was dangerous. That was just too much to bear for him. I was only 22, and that was another hard time for me. I adored my father and had been thinking of getting in touch with him again for a while, but was too proud to take the first step. I dialled his number on his birthday but then put the phone down before he answered, thinking that if he had not gotten in touch with me before, I would call him for his birthday the following year. Just over two months later he passed away.

I was in shock, in tears on the phone. A friend who was there with me tried to comfort me, but I literally kicked him out of my apartment. He fancied me and had been trying for a while to get me to go out with him, without success so far. I thought he was too kind and had no personality, even if he was a nice young man.

I didn't have a car at that stage, couldn't afford to have mine repaired, so I called my friend Francine who was staying at her boyfriend's place, not too far away. I briefly explained what was happening and they quickly came to give me a ride to my brother's place.

After my dad died I was very sad and I missed work for more than a week (I actually was almost relieved we did not get in

touch again before this happened, because it would have been even worse to get close again and then lose him).

I learnt a good lesson back then: Never leave someone you love on bad terms because you don't know what's waiting around the corner... as his children, my brother and I had to organise the funeral. We had no idea how to do that, but we managed, with some help from his partner. We also went to see all his close friends to let them know what had happened and found out that he had seen them all not long before. His farewell to them, I guess, he knew what he was doing. We knew he wanted to be cremated, so we organised everything to follow his wishes. Because he loved the lake and had spent a lot of time sailing on it in his youth, we decided to put his ashes in the lake, and that's what we did. After that, every year that I was in Switzerland, on the anniversary of his death, I would go and put a rose in the lake. I am not very good at visiting cemeteries, but I cannot see the lake and not think of him.

Once again, my friend Fabrice was wonderful. I remember how I went to his place that evening and cried on his shoulder and let him comfort me. My father's death was very dramatic for me, but at the same time it helped me out of a bad situation. I got a small inheritance, part of his superannuation fund, and was able to pay off my debts, which made my life a lot easier from then on. (That's when I was able to start saving for the trip). A few months after my father's death, Fabrice and I were back together for a while, but it was a "rough" relationship. At one stage he basically gave me an ultimatum: either to move in with him or it would be over. I was not sure about that, but I had to at least give it a try. Unfortunately, it didn't work and a few months later we split up again. I was doing the marketing school mentioned later at that time, and although he admired my ambition, he didn't understand how much work was involved and quickly got fed up with me studying

for hours and hours.

I met Fabrice when I was just 19, shortly after I moved in with my father. My friend Eva had a new boyfriend and she wanted me to meet him. We went for a drink one day. Fabrice was a very good mate of Eva's boyfriend and that's how we met. It was love at first sight. I used to get along very well with Eva's boyfriend and we would spend hours in my dad's car, in front of the house, talking. I would quiz him about Fabrice, trying to find out more about him, find out what he thought of me and so on. Fabrice was not interested in any kind of relationship; all I wanted was to be his girlfriend. I was not after any kind of serious commitment. Not long after, he left on a 6 months trip in South East Asia. By the time he came back, I was married. He had a bit of a shock when he found out, but he was the one who pushed me away. We were still good friends and became lovers when things became ugly with Hermes and it is thanks to him that I did not have a depression and that I managed to get through that experience. A few years after my divorce, we were together again for a while, then broke up again and so on. We got together and broke up many times over the next 20 years. Sometimes, I wonder why. I think we were too young when we first met. The fact that he pushed me away at the beginning made me become very wary and insecure, so that, years later, when he was ready for commitment, I was the one not sure anymore.

Never mind, maybe it was not meant to be, but our friendship is very strong and we love each other deeply, and know each other pretty well. Although there are 20,000 km between us, I know I have been in his thoughts ever since this happened, and it's a good feeling. It's important to love and be loved.

Fabrice was always there for me, when I divorced, when my father died, when I came back from my trip around the world,

after Laurent broke up with me, when I came back from India. Friends like this are pretty rare and special.

When I first met him, I was young and silly. I would go to his place in the evening, spend the night there and leave in the morning in tears. And then go again another night and so on. Quite a strange story.

We had a few things in common, but we were also very different. We loved each other sincerely while it lasted, and that's not so bad after all.

I met Laurent in Indonesia, on Sumatra and travelled with him and his travelling companion for a while in Indonesia and then Thailand (more in "trip around the world" chapter).

We were together for a year only, and he broke my heart when he left me, but now, many years, over 10 down the track, I am really happy we met and loved each other the way we did. It was something special, something very strong that everybody should experience at least once in their life. I am grateful I did.

There were a few other people and I promise I won't go through all my boyfriends... I still remember my very first love. It was quite innocent back then, just holding hands and a few kisses. I used to sometimes sleep at my grandmother's place during the week to avoid travelling up and down the mountain all the time. I would say I had to go and study at a friend's place and, instead, go and meet him.

Once, as a joke, he signed my bottom with a permanent pen. I was mortified... I had swimming the next day...luckily, no-one noticed... A few years later, I started taking birth control for him, although we didn't sleep together for a very long time.

When I came back from the study trip in Corsica, he came to collect me at the train station. We had one night for us, since my parents were not expecting me until the following

day. That was supposed to be the night but it wasn't. We first went to a party where we stayed for hours, then to his place with more mates to cook spaghetti.

By the time everybody left and although I had been looking forward to our night together, I was so exhausted that I fell asleep as soon as my head touched the pillow.

There have also been a few short stories, when I was travelling, that I have fond memories of, which I think were very sweet. It was between two consenting adults and no one got hurt.

It's funny, when you meet someone travelling. If there is an attraction, you have to do something about it without thinking too much, because the next day you, or the other person might be on their way and you might never see them again.

I remember one of these stories, in far North Queensland. I met a guy at the backpacker's and was attracted to him. Later, all the guests were at the pool together. He was sitting next to me on the edge, our feet were in the water, and they started "playing" together. It was quite sweet and exciting. Little by little all the other guests left the pool and soon we were alone. We kissed very gently and then decided to try and find some kind of protection, as one kiss can lead to another and much more., that done, he came with me to my dorm, where, luckily, everybody was already asleep,. We had a wonderful night together. We slept in my bunk together and the next morning we had a shower together and he washed my hair. This is something I remember fondly. I left the next day and I have never seen him again. But it doesn't matter because what we shared was sweet. It only lasted one night, but again it was between two consenting adults and it was sincere.

Another time, I was in the kitchen of the backpackers and there was a guy who could not take his eyes off me. After a while, I confronted him and asked him why. He just said he

was fascinated by me. He was camping so we went to his tent for a drink, and we then joined the others again for dinner. It was quite a strange feeling to have that effect on someone. It hasn't happened to me again. Although I have been the source of a few strong passions,

More things to prove my stepfather wrong:

After my apprenticeship, while working in the marketing department of a bank, I decided that I really liked that field, and enrolled in an evening school, to become a technician in marketing, with a diploma equivalent to a degree.

That school is only for people already working in that field and is quite intensive, because it only lasts a year.

You usually work full time; have lessons from 6 to 9pm twice a week, quite a bit of homework, and more lessons on Saturday all day. I really enjoyed it though, and studied a lot in that year. When the time for the final exams arrived, I was not sure I would pass, but I had studied as much as I could, and did my best. A few months after the written exams, we still had the oral part of it, which Klaus (see later) and I spent hours and hours getting ready for, making up questions and answers from our material and quizzing each other all the time. All the oral exams were taking place on the same day.

We then had to wait a few weeks before getting the results by mail. I got my envelope at work and was not sure whether I should open it then and there or not. I really wanted to know, so... I opened it. YES... I had passed; I had become a marketing technician. I ran down the corridors to my boss, the big boss of the corporate affairs department and some friends' offices, entering like a hurricane and shouting: "Yes, I passed" ... It was quite an exciting time. I was the youngest in the country

to get that diploma that year (only 23).

It's through the marketing school that I met Klaus. There were two classes (too many students for just one) and he was in the other one. At the end of the year, we had drinks all together. He gave me his business card and I gave him my work number (I did not have a business card).

He called a few times, wanting to catch up and go for a drink, but my answer was always the same: "I can't now, too busy studying for the exams, maybe later". He called me at home on the Sunday just before the exams. He told me that by then it was too late to learn anything I didn't know already and that it was more important for me to change my mind. I thought he might have a point, so agreed to see him. He came to my place, we went for a long walk by the lake and then for a drink. He told me he was going to stay with some friends in Lausanne for the night, so he'd already be there on the Monday morning (that's where the exams were taking place).

He offered me to join him and I accepted. This way at least I would not get lost the next day and I would not spend the evening worrying. We ended up staying there for the whole length of the exams, 4-5 days.

When the exams were finished, he came to my place for one night and then went back to his place in Geneva. From then on, we started seeing each other very regularly. I'd go to Geneva for the evening or the weekend or he'd come my way, or we'd go somewhere else together, for instance to Neuchatel, where his parents lived.

A few months after getting our diplomas, (luckily we both got it; it would have been disastrous if one of us had failed), we went for a 3 week holiday in Turkey. We travelled all over the country, backpacking and enjoyed it very much. It was a bit of a test, because we had started talking about an adventure

we might do together, and we had to make sure we were getting along well. Travelling together is a good way to find out. We had no issues at all, got along very well and had a ball. We also went to Malta, Corsica and Sardegna together on a holiday in the following years, and again travelled well together

My new objective was to go on a trip around the world with Klaus. I had been dreaming of travelling the world for a while, a few years at least, ever since I had met Fabrice and he told me about his travels. Klaus wanted to travel too, so we thought we might go together.

For 3 years I worked hard, first in the Bank in Geneva, then with Nestle, and later in a small international media agency (the latter one was a disaster).

The boss hated me and I have no idea why she hired me. I think she hated me because she was scared for her job; I was more competent and dedicated than her, even though I never had any aspirations to get her position (director of the agency).

I was the one doing all the work for the clients, and everything going smoothly with the advertising campaign was my reward. This job was such a disaster that I gave my boss my resignation once. She managed to make me change my mind, probably because I knew that after one more year at the most I would have enough money for the trip, and also because it would look better in my resume.

After that though were a few things I didn't take from her anymore. When she changed my covering letter to a client for small unimportant details when I had spent the whole day doing research to get everything right and then signed it, I told her that if she wanted to sign the letter, that was fine, but then she had to do all the work behind it as well. She was not impressed. That was why clients didn't want to talk to her when they called but to me, because she had no idea, whereas I

knew exactly what they were talking about.

The thing is, she also had a children's fashion boutique in Montreux and was obviously more interested in that. I saved my money until I thought I would have enough for a while, and resigned again, this time for good. There was no way I would have changed my mind. I was ready for the next adventure, a new challenge.

During those 3 years, apart from working hard, we also prepared ourselves for this adventure. We read books, I wrote to each country's embassy to get information, put it all together in a folder summarising what was necessary for each country, i.e. visa, inoculations and so on. We never worked out an itinerary. We just knew we would start with South America, and then decide as we travelled.

4

TRIP AROUND THE WORLD

I LEFT SWITZERLAND in January 1992 with Klaus. We first went by train to Le Havre in France where we boarded a cargo ship, the Atlantic Express, to cross the Atlantic Ocean and get to Buenos Aires in Argentina. The trip took about 5 weeks. We could have flown, but we went by ship on purpose. We were going for at least a year, probably more, and we wanted to have time to realise that the adventure had started. It was a lot more expensive to go by boat than flying, but we also wanted a different experience. When you fly you get there so quickly it's not the same. Crossing the Atlantic Ocean was an interesting experience. It was very unusual back then (I think it has become quite popular now), so we had to do a fair bit of research to find a cargo ship that took passengers.

Those ships can usually only take a maximum of 6 passengers, because if they have more, they need a doctor on board, and the Atlantic Express did not have one. I was one of 3 women on board, the captain's wife and the electrician's wife being the other 2. I was the only young one, and I was the princess of the ship, all the crew members were more than willing to help me with anything I might need. We had a small

cabin and had our meals at the captain's table. I had taken quite a few books with me so spent a lot of time reading, but we also often went on the captain's deck to check the radar for other ships. There was a common room with a table tennis table and we played quite a bit. There was also a VCR and a few videos that we might watch in the evening. And we also had a pool at our disposal, which would be filled every day with water from where we were at the time. Quite enjoyable. We obviously visited the whole ship, eager to learn more about how they could navigate for such a long time with a big crew without having to stop for supplies. When we saw the size of the cold rooms we started to understand better. As for fresh water, we had a system on board to desalinate sea water, and used that water for showers, toilet, and so on. Very interesting. The only fresh water that was brought was used for cooking only.

It is quite strange when for days and weeks, as far as you can see in every direction, all you can see is water... We once saw the coast of Cabo Verde, a few ships here and there, but not many.

From France to Argentina, we made 2 stops, the first one after a couple of days only, in Bilbao in Spain and the other one in Sao Paulo in Brazil. Both stops were very short, just to unload and/or load containers. The seas were very calm all the way, but then the ship is so big that you don't notice the waves. Only when we were at the captain's table for meals would we realise that the boat was moving. If you looked out of the window, you would see the water, then the sky, then the water. So it didn't stay flat, but it was a very gentle movement. We crossed the line of the Equator for the first time and were given new names for the southern hemisphere by the captain.

I was called shrimp, which was pretty accurate that day, because I got a bit sunburnt and was all red... We were lucky

and did not have to do any of the mad things sailors make new sailors do on that occasion, like have a rope tied around their waist and have to swim across the ship underwater, and many more.

Land at last. We disembarked in Buenos Aires, Argentina. The first few nights, I missed the gentle rocking of the waves. We were very surprised by the cost of living. It was expensive, as expensive as Europe and we were not expecting that. The first thing we decided to do was to go down to Tierra del Fuego without waiting, while it was still summer. To avoid expensive coaches, we first took a train to Bahia Blanca, and then hitchhiked our way down the continent on Ruta 3 (there is only one road). There was not much traffic, and it wasn't easy. We nevertheless made it and met wonderful people in the process. That first day from Bahia Blanca, it took us the whole day to get a ride. The man, who took us in the late afternoon, had actually seen us in the morning when he was going in the other direction. When he came back and saw us still there, he felt so sorry for us that he stopped and took us in. He then invited us to his home to meet his wife and 2 daughters and we ended up staying with them for a week, it was wonderful to stay with a family for a while, local knowledge is the best. Before we left, they gave us addresses of friends in other parts of the country which helped us a lot.

Hitchhiking was a good way to meet people and to practice our Spanish, which was then almost non-existent. I would understand because I am bi-lingual with Italian and it is similar. I would answer in Italian and would be understood for the same reasons. I have always had an aptitude for languages and learnt quickly.

We had "mate" (local tea) while driving in a big truck. We even did a loop to go and see a penguin colony not far from the small town of Camarones. It took us a few hours to walk

there, but luckily, when we arrived, there were other tourists, locals, and they gave us a ride back to town.

To get to Tierra del Fuego, we had to cross the famous Magellan Straits, from Punta Arenas, in Chile, to Puerto Porvenir, which we did by ferry on extremely rough sea... so rough that I was not sure we would get to the other side. Everybody in the ferry was throwing up and that day I discovered that I do not get seasick. If I wasn't sick that day, I will never be ...It was a bit scary, because not too long before, a ferry had sunk crossing that strait...

When we arrived in Ushuaia, we were shocked again by the prices of everything, even worse than in the rest of the country, since everything has to be brought there. We decided not to stay long. Also the weather was not that great. It had snowed already, making it very hard for us to go to the National Park that we were planning to visit, and we never made it to Antarctica.... After a few days, we went back to mainland Argentina by plane this time... the plane was very small and so loaded that we thought it would not be able to take off (it took the whole air strip and just made it).

The border between Chile and Argentina in the south is not very clear and we crossed it many times (our passports have lots of Chilean and Argentinean stamps.) It was good to travel with a Swiss passport, it made things very easy. While we were in the South we went to the town of Calafate, and from there to see the famous Perito Moreno Glacier. It is huge, and always growing. In the past, it used to grow, reach the other side of the lake, keep growing and then, when the pressure became too much, it would "explode", more or less every 4 years, which is said to be wonderful to witness. This was supposed to happen the year we were there, but because of changes in the climatic conditions, it was far from reaching the other side.

We nevertheless witnessed a few huge pieces falling in the

water which gave us an idea of what the “explosion” would look like, quite unbelievable to see and hear...We travelled for a while with an English couple, and because of the Falklands’ war, custom officials in Argentina were tough on them, taking every opportunity to search them and so on. There were many signs along the road saying: “Las Malvinas son Argentinas” (the Falklands are Argentinean). We never had that problem, of course.

We went to the Torres del Paine National Park on the Chilean side of the tip of the continent, where we saw more glaciers and beautiful mountains. We left most of our things in the town of Punta Arenas, so we would not have to carry them, including one item that we were going to miss immensely, our mattresses.

We knew there were refugees a bit everywhere in the park, and we innocently thought they would have dormitories, like the ones we were used to in Switzerland and France. No such luck, though, and all we found was a concrete floor to sleep on, which is why we really missed our mattresses, for comfort, but also because we were right next to the glaciers and it was freezing cold. They would have provided some insulation from the cold of the concrete. Luckily, we had very good sleeping bags. It was very beautiful anyway, and we never regretted going, not even at night when we were shivering and taking turns to keep the fire going. We were quite happy when we got back to town to have a very hot shower, instead of washing ourselves in ice cold water, which we used to do very quickly...

We started our stay in Chile from the South. We were arriving from Tierra del Fuego, and made our way up the continent. We went through the small town of Perito Moreno (nothing to do with the glacier of the same name), from where we did an excursion to the Rio Pintura’s canyon and La Cueva des las

Manos (the cave of hands (cueva de las manos) where we saw very old, 5 to 8,000 years paintings of hands). We went for a while to the very picturesque Island of Chiloe and the town of Puerto Mont then kept going north, with a stop in Valdivia to see the volcanoes but not much further North than the capital city, Santiago and then Valparaiso. I would have loved to go to the Atacama Desert on the Altiplano, but we didn't, I can't remember why.

We crossed the Andes by bus, from Santiago de Chile to Mendoza in Argentina and had another interesting adventure there. When we crossed the first time, we went through an interesting place, Puente del Inca (natural calcite caves, with hot water pools, stalactites and stalagmites). We decided to go back there on a day trip, to have time to look around. When we did that, we did not realise that we were crossing the border and didn't take our passports with us, not very smart.

We had no problems on the way there, but because the bus to go back was not coming, we hitchhiked and got a ride with locals. The problem was that when they came in they were only 2 but we were 4 on the way back. We were very lucky that the customs officials were in a good mood and that my Spanish was good enough by then to explain the situation. They let us go and we just had to go somewhere the next day to show our passports, which we obviously did. They could have arrested us or not let us in, which would have been just as bad since all our things, passports and money included were back at the guesthouse. I don't know what went through our mind to go without them... We usually always carried them with us, in a pocket under our clothes.

Once back on the Argentinean side, we went to Rosario, about 2 hours from Buenos Aires, where we spent a few days with friends we had met not long before we started our ad-

venture. They were leaving Switzerland to come and live in Argentina (Carlos was Argentinean). They had too many things to bring and could not afford to pay the surcharge to bring them by plane with them. We therefore offered to take them in the ship with us. We were allowed 200kg per head, and only had one backpack each. It must have been funny seeing us on the wharf in Le Havre, waiting to board the ship on a round the world trip with 4-5 very big, and heavy trunks, as well as our gear...yes, to travel light is the key...

From Rosario, we went to the Iguazu Falls (on the border between Argentina, and Brazil). This is another thing I will never forget. It is simply incredibly beautiful.

The waterfalls are huge, and there are timber paths everywhere, so you can actually go down and walk around at the bottom. You get a bit wet, of course, but you are surrounded by beautiful butterflies, and it is quite special, a very tropical climate.

We were very lucky to go when we did, because a few weeks later, it rained a lot and there were big floodings, destroying all the timber paths and resulting in the area being closed for a long time.

From Iguazu which we saw both from Argentina, where you can go down, and from Brazil, where you have a general view, we took a bus to go to Rio de Janeiro.

The trip takes 24 hours, but the coaches in Brazil are very good (compared to some other countries where they are basically old school buses with no space for your legs, no air, and quite run down...) Brazilian people are very friendly and very curious. Klaus and I were the attraction of the bus and everybody wanted to talk to us. I was fluent in Spanish, but in Brazil, Portuguese is spoken. It is similar to Spanish, but the rhythm when they talk is very different and we were not used to it and could not understand them. They had to repeat them-

selves, again and again, and still we could not understand. They were very patient with us. There was nothing else to do (It took us a couple of weeks to switch to Portuguese).

In Rio, we found a nice guesthouse not far from Copacabana beach. We had heard all sorts of awful stories about how dangerous this city is and we were careful, never to show our money, only changing US\$50 at a time because of the mad inflation, and always carrying our passport and most of our money in a special pocket under our clothes. Nothing, of course happened to us, and we spent hours on the streets talking with the locals. We thought it was a pretty safe city. We did all the touristy things, the Sugar Loaf, the Corcovado (the huge statue of Christ that overlooks the city and harbour), as well as various beaches, including Copacabana and Ipanema. It was only weeks later that we understood why Rio seemed so safe. We read an article in Time Magazine and found out that the 1992 EcoForum was held in Rio, and the city had been cleaned out—all the beggars and street urchins had been moved to the nearby island of Niteroy. So we don't know what the real Rio is like. It's a beautiful place, one of the most beautiful harbours in the world, along with Sydney and Hong Kong, I was told.

From Rio, we went inland for a while, because Brazil is not only along the coast. It's a huge country and a big part of it is inland.

We went to the city of Belo Horizonte in the state of Minas Gerais, where we stayed with a family of 12 children, friends of friends. We had a wonderful time with them; they treated us as 2 more children.

Based at their place, we visited many colonial towns in the surroundings, Ouro Preto, (first town in Brazil to be declared world cultural patrimony by the UNESCO in 1933) Mariana, Sabara, and so on as day trips.

Since Belo Horizonte is situated in an area with more than 400 caves, we went to the Lapinhas caves, formed in calcite 600 millions year ago. That cave is 551m long and 40m deep, quite impressive.

From there, we went back to the coast and followed it all the way to Belem, stopping various places. First in Salvador, Bahia (first city of Brazil, where the lambada comes from and supposedly as dangerous, if not more, than Rio). There we met the Australian couple, Candy and Martin, that we were going to travel with for quite a while. From Salvador, we went to Maceio, then Recife/Olinda, (where we caught up with Candy and Martin). The 4 of us then went to Natal, Fortaleza and finally Belem. There, we organised a boat to go up the Amazon River to Manaus.

The Amazon River is 6,577km long, 3,165 of them being in Brazil. In it, there are as many species of fishes as in the whole Atlantic Ocean. The river is unfortunately contaminated, by the mercury from the gold mines as well as the many boats navigating on it, because everything, paper, plastic, etc goes overboard, as we were shocked to witness.

The Amazon tropical forest is the biggest in the world but it's in danger. If we keep taking trees out of it at the same rate, within 20 years it won't exist anymore and the lung of the world will become a desert.

The soil is not very fertile and the trees protect it from erosion when there are floods, making sure it is not washed away. Once there are no trees left, nothing will protect the soil. 45,000 square kilometres have already been destroyed.

In 1990, when Fernando Collor de Mello became president, one could have thought that things would change. Many promises were made, but nothing concrete. The situation is now paralysed. There are many national parks, but they exist on maps only, and their owners keep burning, destroying and

poisoning the forest.

Foreign funds blocked to help the country's conservation efforts are not used by the government, rotten by corruption and that was not able to develop projects in which they could be invested.

There is now a slowing in the destruction of the Amazon, but it's due more to the stagnant economy than to Collar's politics.

It is of course justified to say that Brazil has more urgent problems to attend to. 70% of the 146m inhabitants of the country don't earn enough to feed themselves.

75% of the population live in cities and less than half have access to enough water supplies and a sewage system. In Rio, 800,000 people live in "favelas" (slums) where houses don't have pipes or sewage and every day 400 tonnes of untreated sewage end up in the bay of Copacabana, polluting the sea, and making swimming a hazard.

Another problem of Brazil and other Latin American countries is the one of street urchins. Children under 18 are killed in Brazil in proportions signalled nowhere else, except in countries openly at war.

Every year, over 1,000 children are killed, that is 3 kids a day. Nobody is enforcing the laws for the protection of children. Kids are killed for instance by gangs paid by owners of commerce or shop who are fed up with stealing or because they are used as "mules" by drug dealers and later know too much

There are 200,000 street urchins in the country. A woman is fighting for these children (I don't know her name). She is a lawyer and already managed to get a few convictions. She's been threatened with death but, unlike her colleagues, she will not give up. She is these children's only hope.

To travel up the Amazon River, we did not want to take the

"tourist" boat, so struggled to organise another one. It ended up being just as expensive and very hard and time consuming to organise.

In order to organise that, we had to go a few times to the commercial harbour (Porto comercial), which was quite an interesting neighbourhood, worth a Hitchcock movie. There is no sewage system in Belem, and you can see the vultures circling the city. In the commercial harbour, they have dug trenches that act as sewage and put some timber to act as bridges and you certainly don't want to fall in the trenches. So locals (some people live there) have to make sure they don't come home drunk. That would be an awful experience.

In the streets of Belem I saw for the first time one of my favourite animals, a sloth. A baby one was for sale. I was shocked. I almost wanted to go and buy it and, since we were going to Manaus, to bring it there and free it in the jungle. I never did. I am not sure it would have survived, it might have lost its survival instincts already, but they are too cute.

The trip up the Amazon River was wonderful. Everybody knows that the Amazon is huge, but it's something else to experience it. Sometimes, it's so wide that you can't see the other bank.

We became friends with a little boy who knew an incredible amount of things, because his dad worked on one of these boats. We spent many evenings watching the stars. The sky is beautiful. There are no lights so you can see the stars extremely well. I remember, one night I started counting them. Our little friend became very agitated and he told me that some people say that if you count the stars they fall, so I immediately stopped and never did it again.

At night, we could see some small lights on the banks so we asked our friend about them. He said they were televisions. We could not believe it. In the middle of the Amazon basin, TVs

everywhere, when there is actually no electricity. He went on saying that people had generators, unbelievable.

We enjoyed that trip very much. It is very relaxing, because there is not much to do, apart from admiring the scenery, soaking up the atmosphere and talking with the locals or maybe reading or having a rest. People living by the river really depend on it, and they come close to the boat in their canoes when they see us coming, hoping to get some food or clothes. I will never forget that little girl, maybe 2 or 3 in her canoe with her oar that was so small it looked more like a table spoon. These kids know how to use a canoe before they can walk.

We stopped for a while about half way, in Santarem, to change boats. We first put our things in the new boat, and then went to town to grab a bite to eat. The town was quite a fair way from the river, up in the hill. As we were eating, we heard the boat's horn, calling the passengers and warning them it was about to leave. As we had everything on the boat, we panicked and ran all the way back to the harbour, just to find out that it was not our boat that was leaving, but another one. Better safe than sorry, though, and we had our documents, money and travellers' cheques in our bags and losing them would have been dramatic. Our boat did not leave until the evening, but needless to say that after that we stayed close by.

In Manaus, we went in different directions. Our Australian friends, Candy and Martin, with whom we had been travelling for a few weeks, were off to Colombia and us To Bolivia. We told them we would catch up in their country, once we made it down there.

In one of the cities on our way to Belem, Candy and Martin were looking for binoculars, so finding them became our mission. We knew how to ask in Portuguese: "Tem binocular?" and we went in almost every shop that might have sold them,

and always got the same answer: "Tem" (we have) and then a long pause while we were getting excited and then "Nao" (not), which is the way you say we don't have in Portuguese (we have.....not, tem...nao) it was so funny. I think that we ended up finding some and we sure laughed a lot that day... Another mission was to find the offices of American Express where they were getting their mail. Amex had moved so often, that we went from one place to another, all over the city, but again, we eventually found it. Klaus and I received our mail at the Swiss embassy, which was very easy. We were always keen to get our mail and by getting it at the embassy, we made sure we registered every time we arrived in a new country. The embassy would then know we were in the country.

We were very careful with the food, because when we were there, there was an epidemic of cholera and we didn't want to catch it. We used to eat in the streets and in places where the locals ate, but always avoided salads or things uncooked that might have been washed with contaminated water. We never had ice cubes in our drinks. We also used to filter the water we used to brush our teeth. The only time I got sick was when we went to an expensive tourist restaurant.

Brazil really is a country of contradictions. More than 70 million people, out of a total population of 150 million do not have enough to eat (that's a lot).

Corruption is rampant. Politicians of course are the worst, before elections, they give t-shirts and rice to poor people, trying to buy their vote and, once they are elected, suffer from amnesia and forget all the things they promised, don't change any pre-existing thing to avoid angering influential people, or just because they lose interest. It is easier for them to just get their salary, save for the time of a mandate (4 years) than to try and change things.

In Rio alone, statistics say that 6 million people do not have

enough to eat or a roof over their head. These people hang on together, creating groups and sometimes do a raid on a supermarket, stealing whatever they can so that they can eat. To dissuade them, the owners of the supermarkets have created "torture rooms". If someone is caught, child or adult, he or she gets electro-shocks.

From this poverty also comes the problem of health and hygiene. When we were in South America, there was an epidemic of cholera (as mentioned above).

When you know that the incubation period for the disease is between 2 hours and 5 days and that it can kill someone in a few hours if there is no medical intervention, it is scary. Also if you keep in mind that many people concerned live in the country, can't read and therefore do not get the information about how to avoid it. Although there was a "health post" in every town for that purpose back then, many people live in suburbs or between towns, and have no access to facilities and clean water and so on.

Despite all the problems, Brazilians are very warm, smiley, friendly and full of joy of living (what are we complaining about?)

From Manaus we flew to La Paz, Bolivia's summer capital city 4000m above sea level.

There we finally found the Latin America we had been imagining, (the Altiplano, the colours, the llamas...the pan flute, the, native Indians etc). Klaus was actually not well, suffering from bad headaches due to the altitude. It can be quite dangerous as you can fall into a coma.

We therefore went down to Sucre, the winter capital city (only 2500m), stayed there a few days and then went by bus to Potosi (4,000m). This time Klaus was ok.

In Potosi, we went for a tour in one of the mines on Cerro Rico and this is for sure another experience we won't forget

for a long time. The working conditions are appalling and we were very happy to get out of the mine and see the sun again once the tour was over.

The mine we visited was called Caracoles and is on Cerro Rico, at the feet of Potosi.

The city was created in April 1545 when the Spanish discovered a lot of silver under Cerro Rico. At the beginning of the 17th century, Potosi was one of the most important cities in the world, because of its mining resources.

There were more inhabitants back then than nowadays. But it is still the highest city in the world of that importance (110,000 inhabitants and 4,070m).

There are 500 mine entrances in Cerro Rico and it could collapse any time in the future ("Swiss cheese" effect).

During colonial times, 8 million people, mainly "campesinos" lost their life in the mines.

Until 1952, the mines were private, but they were nationalised around that time. From 1985, the trend was more to privatise them again, which means unemployment for tens of thousands of workers.

There are nowadays 3 types of mines. Private, state and co-op. The one we visited was a co-op. In the co-op, there are associates who are paid in function of what they, and their men extract.

The non-associated miners are paid by day (\$2.50 for a new miner and \$4 for one with experience). They work 8 hours a day, six days a week, but they sometimes work 10-12 hours more and once a week they work for 24 hours non-stop.

When they are in the mine, they don't eat. To cut the hunger and not feel fatigue, they chew coca leaves. They can't bring food into the mine because there are so many acidic emanations, sulphur and so on that anything organic gets literally "eaten".

Miners' life expectancy is about 40–45 years.

There are also women working at the mine, but only outside. They go through the rubble the miners bring out and put aside interesting minerals. They are paid \$1.50 per day.

The mine we visited dated from colonial times and had therefore been exploited for over 400 years. At the entrance, the guide told us that 3 times a year (carnival, Pentecost and August 1st), miners sacrifice llamas (from 2 to 20 each time). They cut their throat at the entrance and then cover the walls, as well as the surrounding small houses, with the blood. These sacrifices are for Tio, the God of the mine, to help them find new sources and to protect them, they are also for the Pacha Mama (Mother Earth).

In the mine, we went down 4 levels, to a depth of about 200m.

Everything in the mine is done by hand, nothing is automatic. The miners also have to purchase themselves everything they need to work, tools, dynamite and so on. Bolivia must be the only country in the world where you can go to the market and buy 10cm of dynamite for \$0.25. Just as well they are peaceful people.

From there, we went back to La Paz for a while. Native Indians have a few strange beliefs (from a Westerner's point of view) and there was one street in La Paz that we used to call the witches' street.

You could find all sorts of strange things, like the dried foetus of a llama (that indigenous people usually bury in the earth when they build a house—their way to thank Mother Earth). They also have quite a few things associated with the mines. Every time a new mine is open, an animal is killed and its blood used to "paint" the entrance of it, a way to ask for protection. Women are usually not allowed to go in the mines, because Mother Earth could be jealous. The day we went, we

had a ceremony before entering to ask for her permission to do so (there were a few girls in our group). The day we visited the mine, we too chewed coca leaves (we used to have coca leaves tea almost every day. It is quite tasty and good for altitude disease).

Peru and Bolivia were actually in the process of getting the curative properties of coca leaves recognised by the World Health Organisation back then. I don't know if they succeeded. I remember there were even commercial coca leaves tea bags, because I bought some and sent them home. The chewing of the leaves is not very nice, but we did not feel the hunger that day, and I am sure it helped us to stay inside the mine for many hours, walking, sometimes even crawling because the tunnels are very small. At least, unlike the miners, we were not carrying 50 kg or more of rubble on our backs.

From La Paz, once we were back there, we also went to the small town of Coroico, not very far away. It's only 1,500m above sea level and the climate is completely different, there are even bananas growing. People from La Paz often go there for the week end, to escape the cold of the capital.

The bus trip was interesting, because first you go to the top of the mountain, 5,800m (La Cumbre) and then you go down to 1,500m in a quite short distance. The road is narrow and not in too good condition and there are crosses and flowers in many spots where people missed a turn and went off the cliff.

When we got to the top, the driver opened his window, poured some alcohol on the road and made a sign of the cross—very reassuring.

We had an uneventful drive down, except at one stage when we had to cross a bridge that did not seem too stable. Klaus and I as well as some other passengers got off the bus and walked across the bridge.

The bus followed without problem. Later on, there was a car coming in the other direction. The road was very narrow and at one stage we had the wheels hanging over the edge but soon enough we were safely on the road again.

After returning to La Paz for a few days, we went to the village of Copacabana, on the bank of Lake Titicaca, the highest lake in the world, which we enjoyed a lot.

The Lake is actually a lot bigger than I thought it would be. There are 2 islands on it, Isla del Sol and Isla de la Luna (Island of the Sun and Island of the Moon), heritage of the Incas, as are all the terraces around the place.

The Incas were the first ones to introduce terraces, to make better use of the land available and grow mainly corn, potatoes but other crops too.

It's through Lake Titicaca that we crossed to Peru.

There, we obviously went to Cuzco in the South, the capital of the Inca Empire.

In Cuzco, many recent houses are built on the foundations left by the Incas who were definitely the masters in stone carving. Their work is so precise that you can put a sheet of paper between the rocks.

Cuzco is a beautiful colonial town. The temples of the Sun and the Moon used to have many golden decorations, but that was all taken by the Conquistadors and sent back to Spain to be melted and become part of the Crown's treasure.

The temples were destroyed, only the walls were kept and used to build churches on top.

The Incas did not have writing as such, they used knots in ropes as a method of writing, but when the Conquistadors found these, they had no idea what they were and they burnt them. What a pity...

When we were there, Peru was badly suffering from the

lack of tourists, due to the very unsafe conditions. It was quite sad...We visited the Inca places close by, the sacred valley, Ollataytambo, Sacsayuan and so on and witnessed, again and again, the precision in the rock carving.

To make sure rocks held together, the Incas used the male/female principle.

We then took a train to Aguas Calientes from where you reach Machu Pichu.

We would have loved to walk the Inca trail from Cuzco to Macchu Picchu (about a one week walk), but were told not to do it as it was too dangerous.

We slept one night in Aguas Calientes and went to the ruins early the next morning, so early that we had them to ourselves for a few hours. It was quite magic and very impressive because they are hidden in the mountain until you get to a point from where you see everything, it is breathtaking.

Almost nothing has been destroyed. The Spanish never found that place and it was only discovered in 1911.

Peru was pretty dangerous when we were there, because of the Shining Path—whose leader had just been arrested. There were daily bombs in the capital city, Lima, so we only visited the south, and then crossed the country by bus to get to Ecuador.

The first stop in Ecuador was Guayaquil in the South. We did not enjoy that city. It's a harbour, so it's pretty rough and while we were in the centre shopping, we heard gunshots in the street, not good. Some friends from Switzerland were meeting us there to spend 4 weeks holidays with us. As soon as we met them, we left Guayaquil and went to Banos, a lovely village in the mountains.

During our stay in Ecuador, we obviously also went to Quito, the capital city, and from there to the famous native Indian markets in Otavalo. We then took a train from the nearby town

of Ibarra to San Lorenzo on the coast, a 12 hour trip.

It's actually not really a train, more a bus on rails, the Autoferro. We started at 2600m and in 200km went down to sea level. We travelled on the roof of the train, which was perfect to take pictures and admire the changes in the scenery and not dangerous because the train goes very slowly, about 25km/hour. It starts with the scarce vegetation of the Altiplano and becomes lush and lush as we travel and drop in altitude, to reach sea level. It was strange, because as we travelled, even the inhabitants changed, and there were more and more black people, descendants of the slaves brought there many years ago. At one stage I wondered if we had changed continent as well.

When we were in Banos, a small town in the mountains, we organised a 5-day trip in the jungle with a guide.

We travelled by canoe, but also went for walks, learnt many things about different plants and their properties, met a Shaman (Curandero) and had a wonderful time.

We were the four of us, the guide and the cook. We slept both nights in small huts and had beautiful food thanks to our wonderful cook. There were a few creepy crawlies in the huts, but we had mosquito nets to keep them outside.

We unfortunately did not see much wildlife, because you have to go a lot further in the forest to see some.

One night, the guide did not tie the canoe properly and, because it bucketed down during the night, the level of the water rose dramatically, and the next morning the canoe was gone. It took the guide and the cook quite a few hours to retrieve it.

When we were in Quito, we witnessed a few manifestations about the "discovery" of America, 500 years before (yes, we were there in 1992) the Indigenous people had banners saying "500 years of massacres" and things like that. They were

not too happy, which is understandable.

In Quito, our friends left us to go back to work and their normal lives and we went to the coast, from where we organised a day trip to La Isla de la Plata, the Galapagos Island for poor people, since there you can find the same birds (but not the rest of the wildlife).

We managed to go there in the boat with the guards, it's a national park, and so had the best possible guides and saw many different birds. We could not afford to go to the Galapagos as we were on a very tight budget. We then went back to the capital city.

We left Quito and Ecuador by bus to enter Colombia through the South.

We first spent some time in villages in the mountains in the south (san Andres de Pisimbala, Popayan, san Agustin...) We were very surprised when we arrived in San Andres, a very small village, to see military men everywhere, not reassuring, until we learnt that the President had come for a visit that day, the reason for their presence.

In the mountains in Colombia, you have to be aware of the guerrillas. We never had any bad experience, but when we decided to leave that place by bus we did not get very far, because the road had collapsed due to floodings. We took our backpacks and started to walk, and were soon stopped by the locals who told us it was too dangerous for us to go alone, so we ended up walking all together. They had to help me with my backpack at one stage, because I really needed to put it down, my neck was killing me.

They didn't want to leave us alone, so one of the men carried it for me and I walked and helped with the children. We had to walk all day to get to our destination, and were pretty exhausted when we reached it.

We tried to organise a bus to come in the opposite direc-

tion and meet us, we were quite a large group, but it never happened.

We visited a few other places in the South, Popayan, and San Agustin (where we saw many stone statues, souvenirs of lost civilisations).

We then took a bus to get to Bogotá, shortly stopping in Ibagué to catch up with the young colonel we had become friends with in San Andres who had invited us to stay with him for a few days.

The trip to Bogotá was a bit scary. Some buses get stopped by the guerrillas, and as a foreigner, you want to make sure they know that you are not a "gringo", not American, because they hate them. We were lucky again and reached Bogotá without any problems. Bogotá is quite big and dangerous and we didn't enjoy the city too much (apart from the gold museum). We could hear gunshots in the street from the window of our guesthouse's room quite often.

We once were stopped by a man saying he was a policeman. He wanted to see our passports. We told him we could go to the nearest police station. He wanted us to get in a car, which we refused to do, saying we would walk, and he then disappeared, seeing that we were smart tourists.

After Bogotá, we went to Villa de Leiva, a small colonial town nearby and then went on to Cartagena and Santa Marta on the Caribbean Coast, both beautiful.

From Santa Marta, we were planning to go to the Lost City, la Ciudad Perdida, which is about one week's walk, but again, locals told us not to do it, because of the guerrillas, but also because you have to cross coca plantations, which was not a good idea.

Instead, we went to Cabo de la Vela and the Peninsula de la Guajira. Getting there was a bit of an adventure, because the bus doesn't go all the way, there are still about 5-10 kms from

where the bus drops you. We were planning to walk, but, it's in the middle of nowhere again, so dangerous. Furthermore, the trail is not very good, it's in an almost desert-like place and if you get lost you could easily die of dehydration there.

We decided to hitchhike instead but there were not many cars going by. A policeman saw us and decided to come to our rescue. He offered to stop the cars coming to tell them to take us. That was very nice, but there were no cars... so we ended up reaching our destination in a police car, yes, they drove us there...

They told us that when we were ready to leave, we should try to find a ride with one of the pickup trucks coming from the nearby city to buy lobsters from the locals.

We enjoyed La Guajira immensely and spent a few days there. The scenery is just incredibly beautiful and the people very welcoming and warm, especially because there are no tourists there.

One evening, as we were outside the guesthouse enjoying the balmy night, we told the lady in charge that the moon was going to disappear. We had read in the papers that there was going to be a lunar eclipse and, sure enough, the moon disappeared. The lady was very worried, but then we explained to her and she calmed down.

From where we were staying, we found a beautiful beach, about one hour walk. It was deserted and immaculate. We would get there, be by ourselves, spend a few hours and then leave and the only thing we could see, were our footsteps in the sand, and the tide coming in to erase them. Magic.

When we were ready to leave, as suggested by the police, we asked the lady to organise a ride for us with the people from the city, which she did and we left the following morning at 4am, in the back of the pick up stopping at every tiny village, sometimes just 1 or 2 huts, to buy lobsters.

It was a rough journey, at the back with the lobsters, but we saw swamps with pink flamingos and so on. I was not able to take many pictures, it was too bumpy and I needed my hands to hold on and avoid falling. The people living there have not changed their way of living for the past 2000 years. Beautiful.

We went back to Santa Marta and stayed there for a few more days. From there, we wanted to go to Venezuela, but there had been a coup a few days earlier, so that was a bad idea and we went to the town of Cartagena instead.

I loved Colombia; it's one of my favourite countries, so leaving it was quite sad. The people had been wonderful, and it was not at all as you imagine by what you read in the papers, yes, there are drug and guerrillas problems, but only a very small part of the population is dealing with drugs and not all Colombians are guerrillas.

The vast majority are normal, law-abiding citizens. They are very warm and curious and we spent many nights talking on the footpaths with a beer, and then they would walk us back to the guesthouse to make sure we were safe. I loved it. Linda Colombia...

My Spanish was so good by then that when people asked me where I was from, I would say, from Cali, a town in the south, and they believed me.

From Cartagena, we flew to Panama. Going by boat and crossing the Panama Canal would have been interesting but too dangerous, due to contraband and drug problems. We always played it safe when possible.

Because we were arriving from Colombia, I was expecting custom officials in Panama to search our things, maybe even a body search, but they did not look at anything. I was quite surprised.

We only spent one day in Panama, another place where you want to make it very clear that you are not American, and

then went on to Costa Rica, Pura Vida (true life as they say). After the most dangerous country in Latin America, Colombia, we were in the safest one.

Costa Rica is one of the very few countries in the world that does not have an army, and it is very safe, and beautiful indeed. The quality of life is a lot better than most of the other Central American countries.

In a park in San Jose, the capital city, I had a close encounter with a sloth. It had fallen off a tree and was crossing the plaza very slowly, of course, to get back to the trunk and climb again. It was very special and rare to have the opportunity to admire one like that. I was a bit cheeky and, in order to have more time to admire it and take a picture, I took it and carried it back, so it had to cross the plaza again. Sloths actually have a flat back so that they don't hurt themselves when they fall off a tree, which happens quite often...

We spent about 2 months in Costa Rica and moved a lot, we then left that country, a bit tired of almost seeing more tourists than locals, and hearing more English than Spanish, and went on to Nicaragua.

What a change. No tourists there. The country has been at war for so long that almost everyone has a gun. As long as you are in by nightfall and don't go to very remote places, you're fine. We visited the South first, that's where we were coming from, the towns of Rivas and Masaya, both enjoyable and then went to Managua, the capital city.

Managua is a disconcerting city. There is no centre as such, more like various suburbs separated by unused fields. The city was destroyed by an earthquake in 1974. The roads are very wide with no traffic and many buildings are falling apart. Just behind the cathedral, to get to the train station, you have to cross a slum, and it is shocking to find one "downtown".

We met a man and decided to try to find out a bit about

the situation of the country. He was a member of the FSLN (Frente Sandinista de Liberacion National). He said that the FSLN made 2 mistakes that made them lose the presidency.

When they took power, the Sandinistas distributed the land to the farmers, providing tools, seeds and loans so that they could work it. The following year, they cancelled the debts and loaned more money and this for a few years.

The farmers used that money to buy clothes and other consumption goods and then had no money left for pesticides and other things necessary to work the land.

The harvests went from bad to worse. When the Sandinistas told the farmers that they could not stay on the lands that they did not know how to exploit, the farmers stood up against them and joined the "contras".

The other mistake that might have pushed the scale the other way was the military service that Sandinistas had introduced and that everybody was hoping they would cancel before the 1990 elections. They didn't though, and that pushed the scale in favour of V. Chamorro.

Since the new government, inflation that was 7,000% in 1990 went down to 7%, but at what price. Health had been subsidised but no longer is. Schools are being privatised and are therefore paying as you go, as well as books, whereas the only obligation for parents before was to enrol their children.

Petrol and gas were also subsidised, not anymore and prices have doubled.

There are no more immunisation campaigns against polio and other diseases.

According to that man, if the situation didn't change, the country would be at war again within 6 months.

Because the government was not keeping its promises, groups were re-arming.

Nicaragua's history is quite complex and dramatic.

In 1893, Nicaragua was already a dictatorship, with Zelaya at its head. In 1909, the USA intervened, threw him out and controlled the country's politics, bringing in marines.

In 1927, a group of guerrilleros lead by Sandino opposed the marines. In 1933, the marines finally left, leaving behind the Guardia Nacional, trained by the USA and headed by Antonio Somoza.

In February 1934, Somoza had Sandino assassinated.

He took power in 1936 and enforced his Constitution. He stayed in power until 1956, when the poet Rigoberto Lopez Perez killed him in Leon.

Antonio Somoza was followed in power by his 2 sons, the youngest one, General Anastasio Somoza Debayle, stayed in power from 1963 until his deposition in 1979 when he left the country. He was later killed in Paraguay in 1986.

In 1961, in Honduras, the FSLN was created. Opposition increased when Somoza took the money from international aid following the earthquake that destroyed Managua.

In 1974, the FSLN kidnapped Somoza's men. It was the beginning of the opposition.

From 1974 to 1976, Somozists eliminated members of the FSLN.

In 1976, Fonseca was assassinated. The response was revolution and on 22nd August 1978, the FSLN occupies the Palacio Nacional.

In 1979, Somoza left the country and the FSLN accessed power. The first objective was reconstructing the country.

In 1981, Reagan stopped the aid to Nicaragua, and financed "contras".

In 1984, the FSLN won the elections with 60% of the votes. The USA said it had been tricked and, in 1985, declared an economical embargo, which was going to weigh heavily on this country already struggling.

In 1990, the candidate supported by the USA Violetta Chamorro, from the UNO (Union Nacional de Oposicion) won the elections with 55.2% of votes against 40.8% for the exiting president Daniel Ortega of the FSLN.

The USA were then under a lot of pressure to provide the assistance promised to the alliance they created, but out of \$300m that the Congress promised in 1990, only half was distributed by the end of May 1991.

On the other hand the embargo was stopped. The USA are still controlling the country.

We also met a boy who asked us to send a letter to his mum from another country to ensure it would not be intercepted. His mum was a political refugee in Switzerland and hasn't heard from her son for over 5 years. He told us he escaped from jail and was very scared of being caught again. He was going to try to clandestinely cross to Costa Rica. We were touched by his story, gave him some money to help out, wished him good luck, and obviously took and posted his letter to his mum.

We kept going, to reach El Salvador. People were very friendly again, and not many tourists there neither. We saw beautiful landscapes.... Our stay in the capital city, San Salvador was very short, as it is not very nice, but again, we met wonderful people, very open, proud of their country and happy to see us,

Some fishermen invited us to join them the next day and we discovered another beautiful beach. I also had the only oysters I have ever enjoyed. I don't like them too much, but the fishermen were diving and getting them for us and we couldn't refuse, it would have been very rude. The oysters were obviously extremely fresh, and they kept going for more. We had a wonderful time. In the evening, there was a fiesta in the town and we were the guests of honour so we had to get up and dance the salsa with them. They are all very good danc-

ers so we just had to follow their lead.

We became friends with many children and I kept in touch in writing for a long time with a girl, who grew up, became a woman, got married and had a child. She wrote to tell me she had called her daughter Monica after me. I thought that was very sweet. After El Salvador, we went to Honduras (the 2nd biggest country in Central America after Nicaragua, with 4.9m inhabitants).

Honduras was neglected by the Spanish who concentrated more on commercial partners south and north, therefore creating disparities in development with neighbouring countries.

Since independence in 1821, there have been 300 internal rebellions, civil wars and changing governments. Political instability led to lack of investments in economical infrastructure as well as in socio political integration, making Honduras the poorest country in Central America with the lowest per capita income in all Latin America.

In 1991, it was estimated that 2/3 of Hondurans were unemployed, that ¾ of the population couldn't satisfy their basic food requirements. 170,000 farmers' families do not have enough land to satisfy their needs.

More than ½ the population lives from agriculture, coffee, bananas, cotton, tobacco, corn, rice, sugar, but it's also a big exporter of prawns.

The country also has big reserves of lead, silver, gold, zinc, iron, copper and coal. Only gold, silver, lead and zinc are exported.

The offshore exploitation of petrol is increasing.

7% of the population is Indian, 90% mixed race, as well as some pure Europeans and Blacks.

In Honduras, we saw our first Mayan ruins, in Copan.

The Mayans were most impressive by the level they achieved in maths. Their calendar for instance was more precise than

the Gregorian one. The Mayans studied the movements of the moon, Venus and other planets. They had 2 different calendars, one ritual of 320 days divided into 20 months of 13 days and one solar of 365 days divided into 20 months. They used them together and the same date would come back every 52 years only.

According to historians, Copan was an important Mayan centre.

It is not known what caused the end of that civilisation around 800 AD—maybe starvation?

Because historians have been able to decipher their writing (glyphs) it is one of the best known civilisations of Central America.

After Honduras, we went to Guatemala, which we loved because again you see native Indians everywhere. We went to almost every small town around the capital (based there) on its market day (as day trips). We could not get enough markets... they were mainly fruit and vegetables markets, for locals, so we were usually the only tourists there.

We also went to the very touristy one in Chichicastenango. You can't really go to Guatemala and not visit it, it would be a shame.

We also went to Antigua the old capital, a charming colonial town, (with many tourists because of the many language schools). From Antigua we went to the active Arenal volcano, most impressive in the dark when you can see the lava. In 1968 it erupted, destroying the town at its base and killing 78 people. It's been active ever since, but only with small eruptions. The noise it makes is unbelievable.

We later went to the Lake Atitlan, and enjoyed that area very much. The Lake is surrounded by volcanoes and the landscapes are beautiful.

We climbed one of the volcanoes from the village of San

Pedro la Laguna. It was hard work, because you take one step forward and then slide 2 back, my muscles were aching as we climbed, but they were fine the next day, unusual.... We also went briefly to Livingstone a small village on the coast and then went to the Aztec ruins of Tikal.

We were very impressed by Tikal, because the site is basically in the jungle and it took us 12 hours on the roof of the bus on a dirt road from Flores to get there. An interesting and dusty trip. In Tikal, we could not find accommodation. (It was very under-developed back then), except a 5 star resort, which was too expensive for us.

We went inside the park to see the temples at sunset, climbed one and decided to hide there and sleep. We had some food, water, our sleeping bags and it seemed like a good idea. Later on, we saw the torch of one of the guards, but instead of hiding and not replying when he called out, we showed ourselves. He climbed the stairs to join us, and sat with us. We talked for a long time and he might have guessed what we were up to, but he did not ask and we said nothing. I think he would have left us there and pretended he never saw us, but then another guard came and... we were asked to leave the park for the night...

The guard we had been talking to for a long time, was sorry for us when we explained the accommodation situation. He said that we could sleep on the ground next to the facility block, but when I saw the huge and many spiders crawling around, I knew I would not be able to sleep.

He was very kind and let us his room, sleeping outside himself. He was obviously not afraid of spiders... The next morning, we were up bright and early to see the sunrise on the temples.

That place is very special, but I have heard that it has changed a lot since I was there. The road from Flores is now

concrete, and there are many guesthouses around. I think it might have lost some of its charm in the process. It was an amazing place in the jungle when I went.

Another incredible trip was from Flores to get to Mexico, in Palenque, on the Yucatan Peninsula, which we did by boat on the river.

It is therefore from Tikal/Flores that we left Guatemala and entered Mexico.

Our first stop in Mexico was Palenque and more beautiful Mayan ruins, a very impressive site.

Then we went to Agua Azul, a beautiful spot on the river, which really deserves its name, because the water is crystal clear. Then to Tuxtla Gutierrez to catch up with a family we had become friends with in Agua Azul. They brought us to el Canon del Sumidero that falls about 1,000 metres, very nice.

We also went to San Cristobal de Las Casas, where there had been a few problems with indigenous people, then on to Mexico City. There, we stayed with the family of Julio, a young guy we had met on our river trip from Guatemala to Mexico.

They were wonderful with us, brought us to many interesting places in Mexico, including the restored Aztec ruins of Teotihuacán, Xochimilco and so on. With Julio, we decided to go and climb one of the two big volcanoes that surround the city, the Popocatepetl.

We first drove to the refuge at 4,000m and slept there for the night to get used to the altitude. The next morning, we started walking, but we were not prepared for it at all.

We had no equipment, the wrong gear clothes-wise, but we walked and walked and walked. At one stage, I decided I had had enough, so sat down in the snow and told the boys to go ahead and get me on the way back. They didn't agree, so I stood up and started to walk again. We finally reached the crater at 5,400meters. That's the highest I have ever been

and I have to say that I was quite proud of myself. It was hard though... it took us 6 hours to climb. There is not much oxygen left at that altitude so you have to walk extremely slowly.

When you get to the crater, there is not much to do, except have a look around, smell the sulphur, shiver because it is extremely cold, and decide to leave. If there are clouds everywhere, you can't see much.

We ran down in less than one hour, because the surface is made of ashes and very soft, so it does not hurt your knees when you run.....When you reach the bottom, look back and see the volcano and realise you went up there, it's quite a feeling of achievement.

We spent a few months in Mexico, went to Oaxaca, Guadalajara and other places, like Puerto Vallarta on the coast.

After one year in South America and 6 months in Central America, we decided it was time to carry on to the USA, where our around the world (by plane) tickets started.

We went by bus to New Mexico and there, in Albuquerque, bought a car for our American adventure. We were planning to spend 3 months in the US.

When we got to the USA, I was so used to speaking Spanish all the time (it had been our language for the past 18 months, although Klaus and I spoke French together), that I was unable to speak in English. It took me a little while, and then I got used to it, not really having a choice. From then on, I started to write my diary in Spanish, in order to not forget all I had learnt.

We bought a car, because you need one in the States. It's a very big country, and there are many places you won't reach if you don't have a means of transport. Coaches will bring you from city to city, but you need a car to get to, and explore the national parks.

In the 3 months we spent in the USA, we travelled all over the country. Our US trip brought us from Albuquerque to Santa Fe, Painted Desert, Craters of the Moon, Monument Valley, the Grand Canyon, Las Vegas, San Francisco, Yosemite NP, Redwood NP (where we saw some of the biggest trees in the world), Olympic NP, Idaho Falls, Bryce Canyon, Cedar Breaks, Canyon land, Arches NP, Yellowstone NP, Denver, Lawrence, Kansas City, Washington, Seattle, St Louis, New York, Chicago, New Orleans, Houston, and Los Angeles. Although we enjoyed the US very much, especially the national parks which are amazing, we missed the warmth of Latin people. The Americans were very friendly, opening their door to us and doing everything they could to make our stay enjoyable. I was nevertheless shocked to notice that when we left them, after a week or a few days they would have forgotten about us almost before the door shut behind us. After what we had experienced in Latin America, it was a bit of change.

We crossed the border to Canada at the Niagara Falls and stayed in Canada for a while, not very long and only Quebec to catch up with some friends. (It would have taken us a couple of months to explore that country properly).

We sold the car in Houston and took a bus to go back to Mexico for a while, about one month, this time visiting the north a bit more (San Miguel Allende, Queretaro, San Luis Potosi, and Guanajato—declared cultural patrimony of the world by the UNESCO).

San Luis Potosi was created in 1544 and is a mining town. The first inhabitants were the Chichimecas in the 16th century. Although they were nomads, they settled there and they discovered the silver that would bring fame to the town. San Luis Potosi was named after the city of Potosi in Bolivia, because in San Luis, as well there are mines.

We went briefly to Dolores Hidalgo, the birthplace of the

Mexican revolution of 1810 and other small colonial towns.

We then flew from LA to Tahiti. Stayed there one day only in transit and then carried on to New Zealand. We visited the north island, spending about 4–6 weeks there (Auckland, the bay of islands, the Coromandel Peninsula, Rotorua, Lake Taupo, and then went to Wellington).

In Wellington, Klaus and I parted company, after 5 years together, including 20 months travelling. Klaus went back to Mexico because he had met a young woman he thought he had feelings for. When he told me, I insisted he go back, because that woman might be his soul mate and it would be sad to just walk past her. I think that if I had asked him to give us another chance he would have, but I was somehow relieved to get out of the relationship. Although we never had arguments or fights, what we had experienced travelling together was very unusual. You don't usually live in each other's pocket as we did for 20 months. I guess we had drifted away from each other and become great mates, but not really a couple anymore. The spark was not there anymore.

I decided to keep travelling by myself. I had no reason to go back to Switzerland, since I still had some money and I would have to start from scratch anyway once I went back. I was on the road, and didn't know if I would ever be able to do it again, so I decided to keep going for as long as I still enjoyed it. I spent 2 months in New Zealand a few weeks in Wellington staying with a friend, but I had seen a bit of the north island with Klaus and then I went south alone and really loved it. I took the ferry to Picton, walked in the Abel Tasman NP, went to Akaroa (the only French settlement in the country), Christchurch, and Kaikoura...

I hitchhiked in the South and met an English young man travelling with his grandmother. We went back all the way to Wellington together. They would drop me at a backpackers in

the afternoon, we'd meet for dinner, and then they would collect me the next morning, very nice indeed.

I even went skiing from Wellington with a friend for a weekend, on Mount Taranaki. I hadn't skied for years, not since I left Switzerland, but skiing is like bike riding, once you know, you don't forget.

I enjoyed New Zealand very much. It's beautiful. It reminded me of home, but even better, because it is bigger and there are less people (only 3.4m and 60m sheep), which explains all the sheep jokes...I loved the very peaceful landscapes, i.e. green fields with sheep, and loved the mountains too, of course. I also enjoyed the fact that you can see nature with no sign of man's presence for a while (that's almost impossible in Switzerland).

My next country was Australia, with a 2 day transit in Noumea, New Caledonia. A French overseas territory. When the plane landed, I thought we were in France, the police car at the airport was exactly the same as the ones I used to see in France and people spoke French, of course, quite strange. . I only spent 2 days in transit there, but I thought Noumea was a nice place, a lot nicer than Papeete in Tahiti.

When I arrived in Sydney, I spent a few days there organising my 3 months stay in this big country and visiting this beautiful city, as well as catching up with a friend I had made in New Zealand. I actually left quite a few things at his place while travelling in Australia. And would get them back before flying to Indonesia. I bought passes for the coaches, so that I would be able to see as much of the country as possible—It wasn't wise to hitchhike, because of the distances, but also because that was when backpackers were disappearing and were later found, dead. My first pass brought me all the way up the east coast to Cairns. Then I had another one from Cairns to Alice Springs, including excursions to Ayers Rock (Uluru) and

Kings' Canyon and down to Adelaide. The last one brought me from Adelaide back to Sydney via Melbourne.

On my way up the east coast I stopped in quite a few places, i.e., Port Macquarie, Byron Bay, Airlie Beach, Hervey Bay (from where I went on a 4WD tour to Fraser Island). I enjoyed Fraser Island very much. It's an island of sand, with beautiful scenery. We were camping, had dingos visiting the campsite in the evening, and had a great time.

I then went to Townsville (from where I took a ferry to go to Magnetic Island) I met many people from around the world and I found travelling in Australia very easy. From Cairns I took an excursion to go to Cape Tribulation and the Daintree Forrest. I also went to Kuranda by train. Australia, for me, was party country, because I partied almost every night.

From Cairns I went on to the outback, Alice Springs, (as well as one day in the McDonnell range), Ayers Rock (Uluru), and King's Canyon.

I did the walk in King's Canyon very early in the morning, and even climbed Ayers Rock, then walked around its base. I loved both those places. They are quite special.

From Alice Springs, I went south to Adelaide, stopping to see the opal mines in Coober Pedy which is a very unusual and interesting place, though a bit rough. It is so hot in summer that people live in dugouts where it is nice and cool...

I arrived in Adelaide in the morning of 31st Dec and my friends Candy and Martin were waiting for me at the bus terminal. It was really good to see them both again, because we had a great time together in Brazil.

It was very enjoyable to have a room for me and be able to completely empty my backpack and put a load of washing on... They really looked after me and brought me to the Barossa valley and other places, like Victor Harbour, Cleland NP, Murray Bridge, Cape Jervis, and so on. I stayed at least 2

weeks with them and I had a wonderful time. I still remember how Marty would bring me a glass of orange juice for the night every evening. I teased him when he became my brother-in-law, telling him that the service was no longer what it used to be.

I was in tears when I left Adelaide to go to Melbourne and then back to Sydney. In Melbourne I stayed with Candy's brother, Vince (whom I had met while staying in Adelaide). Vince was working during my stay, so he would leave in the morning, I'd spend the day visiting and we would catch up in the evening. We went out for dinner once, and another evening, he cooked for me. We got along well and had interesting conversations. When I left for Sydney, he drove me to the bus terminal. When we said goodbye, I kissed him on the lips, just a peck, but that kiss made him stay in touch with me in writing for over 2 years and then come to visit me in Europe. He was quite shocked when I told him I didn't remember doing that. It meant something he said. And he travelled 20,00km so it must have...

From Sydney, I flew to Jakarta, in Indonesia. When I got there at the airport I met a French girl, Pascale who asked me if we could share a taxi to the city. I said of course, but I am going by bus. We spent a few hours at the airport, sitting on our backpacks and talking.

We clicked and decided to travel there for 2 months together (we are still very good friends now...) Pascale had a sad story, because her boyfriend, whom she was very much in love with, had died there about a year before. So for her it was a bit like a pilgrimage, something she needed to do to be able to turn the page.

We first spent some time on Java, going to Bandung, Bogor, Yogyakarta and other places, like Mt Bromo. From Yogya, we visited the important Buddhist site of Borobudur.

Borobudur was built during the dynasty of Syailendra at the beginning of the 8th century. The architecture of this temple follows the Buddhist philosophy.

There are 3 different worlds: the "Kamadhatu", the world of desires, the "Rupadhatu", the world where human beings are freed of their body form, their problems, and the world of "Arupadhatu, the sphere of gods, of perfection, the nirvana. To achieve Arupadhatu the soul abandons its body and enters the world of spirits

This temple was used for meditations and for rituals from a Buddhist sect. The name means "monastery on the hill". The carvings talk about the lives of Buddha. He appears in his human shape or in one of his reincarnations (elephant, bird...)

In Kamadhatu, the carvings and the base were covered by a wall. There are 2 explanations for that: either the whole structure was about to collapse or the carvings were considered too obvious for the young Buddhist. The wall was destroyed during the Japanese occupation.

In Rupadhatu, we learnt about Buddha's life. Siddhartha, who founded Buddhism, was born in the Lumbini garden in Nepal. His dad was a king. His mum died one week after giving birth to him. He had a very "secluded" life. When he got to adulthood, he married princess Gopa. One day, he had a vision. He saw 4 images representing aspects of life that he had never imagined or experienced: a blind man, a sick man, a dead man and a monk.

He was then inspired to leave the palace looking for wisdom, he therefore became a hermit and studied with well known professors. He was still not satisfied; He then followed his own path, the "madyanika". He meditated under the Bhodi tree and reached "Budhahood".

After his enlightenment he was called Buddha Gantama. In that part of the temple, there are many statues of Buddha.

When the palm of his hands is pointing downwards, it's that he is calling the spirit of the earth to witness his victory over bad spirits and to witness his inner strength.

When his palms are open, he shows his forgiveness and blessing.

With his palms up, he shows his immunity to danger and when he does a circular movement with his hands, he shows that he is teaching an honest and pure heart.

We also visited the Hindu temples of Prambanan. Very impressive too.

We then went to Bali for a while, stayed in Ubud, avoiding touristy Kuta as much as possible. We went to Lake Bratan and Lake Batur, and enjoyed Bali, because it is a beautiful island, even though there were too many tourists (especially Japanese and Australian).

We then decided to go to Sumatra. There, at the bus terminal in Bukittingi, we met again the 2 Belgian guys who were in the same restaurant as us earlier, we were going to the same place, Lake Maninjau, and so we travelled together. When we got there, we hurried together to the guesthouse and got the last 4 beds in the dorm. We spent the afternoon playing dice and talking, finding out a bit more about each other. By evening I was very attracted to Laurent and vice-versa. We felt very comfortable together, as if we had known each other for a very long time, and were attracted to each other in a powerful way. I think our souls talked to each other. Very quickly we became a couple; it was funny, because we had to touch each other all the time, either holding hands, or one hand on the other's knee, and so on. We were quite cute I think and soon became the guesthouse's mascots, but everyone in the dorm was quite relieved when we finally got a room for ourselves. Laurent had only just started travelling and was surprised by everything... having been on the road for over 2

years already, I needed a little bit more to be in awe.

What Laurent and I experienced together was very strong and special. When we went different ways, from Lake Toba on Sumatra, we organised an appointment to catch up later in the year in Thailand. Laurent borrowed one of my rings that he liked a lot.

From Indonesia, Pascale and I went to Singapore. We were on Sumatra and had to get back to Jakarta to catch our flight. It was bad timing, because it was the end of the Ramadan and that's when everybody travels.

We managed to organise a bus, ended up in another one, not as good, and spent 48 hours in it to reach the capital. It was the trip from hell, it was very hot and uncomfortable and the bus even broke down and we had to wait for hours for a replacement part to come so the bus could be fixed.

Pascale and I were getting a bit upset because we were starting to realise that we would miss our flight. The Indonesians only realised how upset we were when Pascale burst into tears. Luckily we managed to get in touch with someone who called the airline and changed the bookings for us. When we finally reached Jakarta, we swore that we would never again spend that much time on a bus.

When we had a shower at the guesthouse, the water turned black. That's how dirty we were.

Because our visa had expired, we had to go to the immigration office the following day in order to get an exit visa and be allowed to leave the country. It took us most of the day, but we got it, and shortly after we left for Singapore.

After about a week in Singapore, our roads went different ways. Pascale was off to India, and I to Malaysia and Thailand, but we knew we would see each other back in Europe, because we had lived something special together and a very strong friendship was the result of that... In Malaysia, I went to

Malacca for a few days, then to Penang and then crossed to Thailand. There, I caught up with Laurent who honoured our planned endeavours. (I was not sure he would, although I hoped so...) We were both still very much in love and stayed together for over a month, visiting various islands, Koh Samui, Koh Tao and Koh Phan Ghan.

We still always needed physical contact, and were getting closer every day. After the islands, we went to Bangkok where we stayed for a while and then went different ways. The day we went in different directions, I asked Laurent to give me back the ring he had borrowed in Indonesia. He wanted to keep it, but ended up giving it to me. We were on the streets of Bangkok, Laurent and his travel companion got on a tuk tuk. As the tuk tuk got into the heavy traffic, I decided that I wanted Laurent to keep my ring until we saw each other again in Europe. So, like in a movie, I took it off my finger (I was already wearing it) and ran after the tuk tuk. Luckily a light turned red ahead and I was able to catch up with them. I quickly handed the ring over to Laurent and gave him a last kiss. After that, yes, I started crying, although I knew we would see each other back on the old continent. Laurent was off to Malaysia, and I went to northern Thailand. This time by myself. I got very sick and, not enjoying it that much I decided to go back to Malaysia and see a bit of the east coast before going down to Singapore to catch my flight back home...in Singapore, I saw Laurent again, which was not planned but was a very pleasant surprise indeed (and which made us become even closer if possible).

Then, after two and a half years travelling the world, I was finally on the plane that was bringing me back to Switzerland.

In all that time travelling, I never had any bad experience, although we were a bit unlucky in Ecuador.

When we went to the line of the Equator by bus, although

we knew it was known that thieves had a predilection for that bus that always had many tourists on board, and therefore were very careful, someone managed to cut my handbag without me noticing anything. Luckily, although my camera was in there, together with my passport, all they managed to steal were a few letters I was planning to post once we got back. I had to write them again. Just as well they didn't get my passport... Another time, still in Ecuador, someone came in our room at the guesthouse and stole our short wave radio. We had insurance, but we didn't manage to replace it.

Another day, when we were at the bus terminal waiting for a bus, Klaus left me with the bags to go and buy toothpaste. I was very careful. Then he returned and I did not pay that much attention anymore. The problem is he left again without telling me, and when he came back, shortly after, our day-pack had disappeared. Again, nothing too serious. We lost some malaria tablets, our picnic lunch and, the worst, our travel guide (that, luckily, we were able to replace relatively quickly). It taught us a good lesson: always keep the other informed of what we are doing.

We went around the world on a shoestring. On average, we spent US\$10 per day per person, everything included (food, transport, accommodation, even souvenirs and excursions).

To manage that, we obviously stayed in cheap and basic accommodation, always ate where the locals eat, and had a fairly simple life during our adventure. This is also what you are doing to have contact with the locals who have very little money to spend.

We learnt to juggle in Ecuador, made our first juggling balls in Guatemala, and from then on, would spend a lot of time every day on the "plaza" of the town or city we were visiting, which we had been doing from the beginning of our adventure. It was a good way to make contact with the locals. With

the juggling, within minutes, we had all the kids around us, and contact was even easier.

I thought the children everywhere, were surprising. They have a very different life from kids in “developed” countries. They have to start to work to help their families at a very young age, shining shoes, or selling small things on the streets. They have very little, play with a stick or anything they can find can’t even always go to school, but they usually have a smile on their face. What a life lesson. I will always remember that little boy who was shining shoes somewhere in South America; he was so small, that his box was bigger than him. I think some kids from “developed” countries should see that, it might teach them a lesson and make them realise how lucky they are to be born where they were and not on the footpaths of Bogotá or else.

I have travelled a lot indeed, and these are the countries I visited, either on my round the world trip or in travels beforehand:

Argentina, Chile, Brazil, Bolivia, Peru, Ecuador, Colombia, Panama, Costa Rica, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Guatemala, Mexico, the United States, Canada, New Zealand, Australia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Singapore, South Africa, India, Turkey, Malta, Italy (incl. Sardegna), France, (incl Corsica) Austria, UK, Spain, Germany, the UK, Belgium. There are still many more places I’d like to go and many others I’d like to go back to.

I heard or read somewhere that there is a club for people who have visited at least 50 countries. I have been to many, but still not enough to be a member of that club.

It’s important to remember that all the facts for each country in this chapter are extracts from my travel journal; I collected them from guide books, local newspapers and talking with the locals. They should therefore be taken with extreme cau-

tion. Furthermore, I travelled in the early 90's and many things might have changed. I can't assure that they are accurate.

What did I learn from all that travelling? That the world is beautiful, that people who have very little are usually prepared to share, sometimes more than people who have a lot. That there are wonderful people everywhere and that if you smile to the world the world smiles back.

That we have to accept people the way they are and try to understand our differences, because that's what makes life so interesting.

That people, even when they have very little, usually have a smile on their face, and are warm, welcoming and helpful and, prepared to share the little they have. They are also, usually, proud of their country and eager to talk to the interested visitor about it.

It was a wonderful experience, one that would be beneficial to anybody and one I dream I might do again in the future on a smaller scale with my children. It's a good lesson of life. As we say in French, "les voyages forment la jeunesse" (travel forms youth).

As tourists, we were obviously often targets for beggars. I was never one to give my money away just like that.

When asked for money, I would, instead, give some fruit or bread, or go to a shop and buy a sandwich or something to eat. On our trip up the Amazon River, when we stopped in Santarem, we went to the town to have lunch. The portions were huge and I did not even eat half of it. There were 4 boys looking at us, so before they asked us for anything, I told them that they could have my meal if they wanted. They were more than happy with that and ate it in a flash. If you are prepared to do that, it means you are hungry.

I also remember that 3 girls in a small village in Bolivia told me that I was mean. They insisted for me to take a picture of

them when I did not really want to. To be nice, I did, and then they wanted me to pay for it. I got a bit upset and explained that if they wanted money for a photo, they had to say it before, not after. That's when they said I was mean.

I never paid for any of my photos. I'd prefer not to take it. I like my photos to be natural; I don't want people to pose for them. I also think that paying to take a picture is sending the wrong message.

I used to have pencils and pens with me that I would give to children. They have to bring their own to school, and their parents don't always have money to buy them.

We always had a wonderful contact with children. They are very curious and were eager to find out where we came from and so on. Speaking their language fluently made it very easy and interesting. In some countries, because my hair had become very fair and blonde because of the sun and salted water, the kids were surprised and would ask me if they could touch it. I might have been the first blonde person they had ever seen.

5

BACK HOME FOR A WHILE

I CLEARLY REMEMBER the day I came back, after such a long absence. It was a Sunday. I had arranged for my brother Luca to collect me at the airport in Zurich and then organise to go to our mum's place for lunch, without telling her that I would be there, of course. She knew I was on my way back, but had no precise date for my arrival. It was great to see Luca again. We got out of the airport so quickly that I actually missed 2 friends who had come to welcome me and I didn't even hear their announcement... In no time, we were in the car, on the way to our mum's place.

When we got there, I hid behind my brother until my mum came to the door. A very emotional moment. I think the most emotional person was my little brother Francois. It was wonderful to see them all again and to spend the day together. Family is important and I had been away for a long time. When I left on the trip, Francois was only 11 and he was 13 ½ when I came back. Quite a change: taller than I. I could not affectionately call him my "bug" anymore (although I did and still do).

We were very close when I left, because I used to spend

time with him on a regular basis. But because I missed 2 ½ very important years, we didn't have the same relationship anymore, not as close and I was not really a "confident" anymore, although we are still pretty close. (He is a young man of few words), but I love him dearly, and so does he, love me.

When I came back from my trip around the world, I also caught up with a man I love very much, my spiritual father as I call him, Claude. He was thrilled by my stories and told me I should tape myself talking about the trip. I now wish I had... That first time I caught up with him on my return, I went to his office dressed as a Bolivian native Indian, I had the skirt, the shawl and, of course, the hat. When I walked through the train station, there were some people playing the pan flute. They were obviously from South America, (Bolivia or Peru) and they looked at me in a funny way, and smiled broadly... That day, Claude gave me a book that was going to have a big influence in my life.

When I got back to Switzerland, my bank account was looking pretty sick and I had to find a job, quickly. I knew I would not find something in the marketing area as quick as I needed.

I therefore registered with the temp work agencies and found out I had a big weakness: I did not know the Windows system which did not exist when I left for the trip.

At one of the agencies, there was a spare computer and they agreed to let me come and get used to Windows on it. They never regretted that offer, as I quickly started to help with various tasks, answering the phones and so on.

Not long after, I got a 5 week mission in the chocolate department in Nestle. One of the people I was working for was Brazilian. I used to go and have a smoke in his office and we became friends. He actually fell madly in love with me.

I was happy to get a temp job in Nestle, because I knew

that once I had one foot in, it would be easier to get another job. Sure enough, these 5 weeks became 5 months replacing someone on maternity leave in another department and I was later offered a job with a fixed contract (not limited in time), that I refused for various reasons.

At the beginning when I was back home, I was still very much in “travel” spirit. I would walk in the streets and say hello and smile to everybody. I’d get on the bus and do the same. I got quite a few strange looks from people. It didn’t take me long to stop doing that. Sad, isn’t it? But people thought I was either mad or a bit simple, whereas I was just being friendly. I got back to my normal Swiss way. Friendly, but not with unknown people.

After having returned from my trip around the world, I quickly caught up with Laurent who came for weekends or I went to Brussels, or we would meet half-way, in Paris. We were still very much in love with each other but didn’t see how our relationship could last with 800kms between us. I was prepared to move to Belgium so that we could be together, and was actually looking for a job there, but Laurent got scared, and broke up with me. He was not ready for commitment. This was terribly hard for me. I thought we had something special; and we did, we shared something uncommon and fantastic. As he wrote in one of his letters, two people met, loved each other deeply and sincerely, and that’s pretty good. And so it is, in hindsight. When he broke up with me though, it was a bit harder for me to see it that way. I still believe that what we experienced together was magic. I guess it could be called consuming. He must have been my soul mate. It sure was a powerful feeling, and now that I have been able to talk to him again, I know that he also thinks of our relationship in the same way, and that’s special too, it wasn’t just a fragment of my imagination. I tried to find him again after all these years, because he kept

appearing on the pictures I was scanning (I wonder why...). That brought back many memories, of our time together and reminded me of how strong the link between us had been. Our story only lasted about a year, but it was a year full of emotions, enough emotions for many years, and there will always be a special spot for him in my heart. That made me want to know what had become of him, and to let him know what had happened to me. As I told him, I would not want to die without having talked to him again...

When Laurent broke up with me, I decided it would be a good time for me to go to India, a country I had not been able to visit on my round the world trip. (I was attracted to that country and needed to do something to change my ideas and get over Laurent). My then boss, thinking that I might enjoy a different experience since I had already travelled so much, suggested I go there and work there. She also offered to take me to Malaysia with her, where she was being transferred shortly after, but it was India I was interested in. She knew the managing director of Nestle in India, rang him and managed to get me a job as executive secretary. I had to quit my job in Switzerland to go there, and be hired on local conditions. That was fine by me; I didn't want to be an expatriate. My objective when going to India was not to make money out of it.

After Laurent broke up with me, before I left for India, I had a short affair with the Brazilian man I worked for earlier, but this time I was the one to be scared. He was madly in love with me, used to keep my hair and fingernails and weird things like that. He told me that he had always been strongly attracted to Switzerland. Where he came for the first time with his parents when he was a teenager. He later worked for Nestle and was transferred there, to the international headquarters, but he was still not happy, something was missing. And then, he said, I met you and I could see clear, you were the one miss-

ing in the picture, the one who attracted me so strongly to this country.

He was over 20 years older than me and I could not really see any future for us. When I went to work in India, he called and wrote to me regularly, but he soon noticed that I was drifting away. It was therefore not too much of a surprise when I broke up with him on my return—he was expecting it.

6

INDIA

AFTER ONLY JUST over a year back in Switzerland, I am off again, this time for India. At the beginning I was planning to stay for a whole year, working for 6 months and then travelling for 6 months. I have to say that I found India quite hard for a woman alone. Although always wearing long pants and shirts and being very decent, I had the impression that men were looking through them, saw me naked and I didn't feel comfortable at all and very vulnerable—Western women have a terrible reputation. I was lucky and with work we had a marketing seminar in Agra, where I went, as a member of the Sales and Distribution department. I obviously visited Agra, and surroundings, including the Taj Mahal. (I had seen so many pictures of it before that I didn't think I would be impressed. It is very different to see it for yourself, though. It is an unbelievably beautiful building).

I went with the participants to visit many other sites in the area. Being with a group made it a lot easier for me; no one would bother me then. We also visited Jaipur, the "pink" city. Back in Delhi after the seminar, I made up my mind and decided to spend only one month travelling. In that one month,

I went to Jodhpur, the “blue” city, and then Jaisalmer, door to the desert and from there went and slept one night in it. I then went on to Udaipur, Bombay and then down to the south, in Trivandrum before going to Goa and then back to Delhi. Because I was only travelling for a month, I went mainly by plane (it’s a big country). While I was working I also went away one weekend in the mountains, to Dalhousie, North of Delhi, from where you can see the Himalayas. I also went to the camel fair in Pushkar, an interesting experience, and one weekend to Varanasi/Benares with the lady I was living with, so had the opportunity to see the Ganges, as well.

India is a fascinating country; I loved the colours and the food, of course. I was often eating from stalls in the street, but never got sick. Although you can obviously see the poverty, even misery around, you have to learn to see beyond that. There is something spiritual in the air that I could feel. In Nestle, where I was working as an Executive Secretary, I must have been like a hurricane, and a big breath of fresh air. I was treating everybody the same way, from the guard who opened the door for me in the morning, to the managing director. Not being Indian, I was not bothered with castes considerations. For me they were all human beings who deserved respect, but that must have been a bit of a shock for some of them.

It was funny, because at the beginning, I could not understand my boss. It took me a little while to get used to the Indian accent when talking English, but pretty soon I was Ok. I quickly became friends with one of the other executive secretaries, and we used to spend a lot of time together on the weekends, which was great for me. Being with a local woman meant that I would not be bothered and she knew where to bring me. We went to the red fort, in old Delhi and many other sites together. While I was working there, we also had the launch of a new product, Kit Kat. That was a good experience, because

I worked with the sales force and we spent 2 days going in those innumerable small points of sale to bring the product, put advertising banners, give out samples and so on.

India is very different from any other market—it was a very interesting experience indeed.

While in Delhi, I was living with a lovely Indian lady. I had my meals with her, my own bedroom, where I would go after dinner to read for a while, write or whatever I wanted to do. My bed was just under the fan and when there was a power cut during the night, (which happened quite often) I would wake up within minutes in a sweat.

At one stage we had a lot of rain and the centre of Delhi, where I worked had about 50cm of water everywhere. It was not reassuring, getting off the bus in the water, because you can't see where you put your feet and the footpaths are not always in good condition.

One night when I was going back home, I saw the shadow of something huge ahead of us. As we kept going I realised it was an elephant in the middle of the traffic.

I also saw a few cows here and there, but not that many in Delhi. I saw a lot more in the very narrow lanes of Varanasi. Because they are sacred, you can't shoo them away. You have to wait until they decide to go somewhere else.

I came back from India just before Christmas in 1995. Not long after my return, I called Claude, my "spiritual father", already mentioned earlier, to catch up with him and was told that he was sick.

I called again a few days later and found out that he was very sick, not just a cold or the flu as I had thought. I had a little present from India for him (he used to always bring something back for me when he went abroad on business), so it was my turn. Knowing how serious his condition was, I decided to write to him and send him my present. I am so happy I did it straight

away, because shortly after he passed away. His wife called me to tell me he had received my letter and present and immensely enjoyed them.

I was quite upset about his death, because he really was like a father for me. We had known each other for over 10 years, working together and appreciating each other. When we worked together, he used to be the head of the Corporate Affairs Department. I was assistant to the issues manager (I had only just finished my apprenticeship back then and the company had agreed to keep me for a few months). The people I was working for wanted to keep me indefinitely, but it was against company policy, that said that apprentices had to leave the company to gain some experience somewhere else.

A couple of years later though, when I was looking for a job around there because I had moved back in the area, I called them, and they hired me again (we never went through the HR department that time). They knew me, and I had already worked for the Issues Manager and that was who they were looking for. He was more than happy to work with me again.

I even managed to get the company to pay for part of the marketing school's tuition. They wanted me to sign a 2 year contract with them. I was not too keen. I had already paid the tuition, would have been happy to get some money back, but didn't think it was worth signing a two year contract. The head of the department, Claude, agreed with me, negotiated for me and in the end, I got some money back and never signed anything.

One day that his assistant was sick, Claude asked me to bring him a file. I didn't know her way of filing, had a good look around, thought I had found the right one and brought it

in his office. It was not what he was looking for though, so he threw it back at me. I was very upset and stormed out of his office and ignored him for the rest of the morning. After lunch, I was working on the computer when I felt a presence behind me and then saw a hand full of chocolates. It was him, of course. I took the chocolates (I can't say no to chocolate), but then told him it would cost him more than that for me to forgive him. He later called me in his office. I went, grumpily and he apologised. That was what I wanted and we were friends again.

When he arrived in the morning, I was usually already there and I would always offer him a coffee (he was the only person I would willingly make a coffee for—I used to hate being asked to make coffee).

One morning, as I brought his coffee in his office, I found him with his computer monitor in his arms, trying to put it in the rubbish bin. He then wanted to get all the cords out. I stopped him just in time, as this would have stuffed up all the computers in the department. He had been trying to do something, didn't manage and got so frustrated that he decided to get rid of the computer. I laughed, gave him his coffee, wished him a good morning and helped him out. I then called the IT department and they sent someone to fix the damage he had caused. He was not very computer literate, he was of the old school, I guess.

After I left Nestle, we started catching up for lunch about once a month, because then no one could find anything to say about it. It would not have been seen that well when we were working together. I have missed him very often since he passed away.

When I came back from India, I let the Human Resources Department in Nestle know that I was available again. One Monday morning I got a call telling me they needed some-

one for 2 days in the Environment and Regulatory Affairs Department. It was very short and I was not interested, so said sorry, but no thanks. I put down the phone and thought a bit more, realised I was not really in a position to refuse a job (remember once you have one foot in...) so I called them to say, I could be there within 2 hours. Again, the 2 days turned into 5 weeks, and then I was offered another position in another department for 5 months

After that I was again offered an unlimited work contract. I was even able to put my conditions: I wanted to be able to have a block of 6 weeks leave the following year to do something I was planning to do, and I wanted the company to pay for Spanish lessons. My conditions were accepted, they really wanted me. With my Spanish lessons, I managed to get El Diploma Superior de Espanol como Lengua Extranjera de la Universidad de Salamanca, the equivalent to the Proficiency for Spanish, which enables me to teach Spanish anywhere in the world. Although I would not know how to do that, after all, I am not a teacher.

I have quite a long history of working with Nestle, in many different departments. They always hire me again, so I must have a good file. and I know the company pretty well. When I left to come to Australia, the General Manager, responsible for that area of the world wrote a recommendation letter for me. When I made offers to Nestle in Sydney, there were no vacancies though. I was later told that they should have created a position for me, because my knowledge of the company definitely was a big asset. They obviously didn't see it that way when I made my offers.

7

THE AUTHOR WHO TOUCHED MY HEART

NOT LONG AFTER I came back from India, my favourite author published a new book (that I had already read in Portuguese, while in India because my Brazilian friend had given it to me back in Switzerland, together with 2 more from the same author.)

A friend of mine found out that the author was giving a conference in a town approx. 90 kilometres from where I lived, so I decided to get tickets and go. When I called I was told that it was full already, but I couldn't give up that easily, that would not be me. I am a very perseverant person.

I soon found out that he was also supposed to be the main guest in a Swiss TV programme, so I called the TV channel and got invitations for that. It was clear in my mind that after that (which was happening in the afternoon of the day as the conference), he would have to take me with him to the conference, and I would make sure of that... I received the invitations, put them away somewhere safe (they were very precious to me, my ticket to meet him). A couple of days before the big day, I tried to find them to put them in my car and be ready on the Friday, but although I went over my whole flat

they had disappeared. I called the TV channel to organise more and was told that he was not to be guest anymore, replaced by someone I was not interested in at all, so I said not to worry about the invitations. I prepared a fax explaining that I was his no.1 fan and that he couldn't not come to Switzerland and not meet me and explained the story of the invitations' disappearance and cancellation of the TV programme. I finished by saying that if this was not a sign then I didn't know what one would be (one of his books talked about following signs and so on).

I sent my fax to his home in Brazil—I had the number because I had very briefly met him at the book fair in Brussels the year before, when Laurent broke up with me. When I met him there, I asked him to sign my copy of his book. Inside I had typed pages of the parts of the book that had touched me most. He saw them and asked me what it was. I told him and he said he'd like a copy. I left him and went in search of a photocopy machine. That done, I sat down and wrote him a note in Spanish. I then went back to the stall where he had been signing books, but he had disappeared and I was told he had to urgently leave for Paris, I was very disappointed, of course, but managed to get his business card and sent him my notes and my covering letter at his home address in Brazil.

To make sure I'd be able to attend the conference and meet him again, I called his editor in Paris to find out where he would be staying. Of course they could not give me that information, but they gave me the fax number of his press contact person saying that if I sent a fax, it would be given to him, and that's exactly what I did. I sent again the fax I had already sent to his home, with a new covering note. The next day, I got a call from the press person, telling me that he was looking forward to meeting me, that I had to go to the conference and if they didn't let me in, ask for her and she would make sure I

could get in. I was very excited and couldn't wait for the Friday (Patricia, my dear friend would be coming with me).

On the Friday, we left work early to make sure we wouldn't be late since we wanted to grab something to eat before the conference started. We ate very quickly and then went to the venue. Patricia saw him arriving and pushed me towards him, but I told her to wait. We had no problem to get in, although the room was full and the evening started with the interviewer noticing that the room was full and saying that the author had become very popular, and that he was actually telling her before, outside, that he had even received threatening faxes at his home in Brazil (I knew it was me because I wrote that he could not come to Switzerland and not meet me, no threats though, just a statement). Sure enough, he said, "I'd like to know if she is in the room", so I put my arm up and got a round of applause from the audience. I was very hot and red but slowly got back to normal. The conference went well. When it was finished, the author had a session of book signing. I had all my books with me, and that was quite a few, in French, some which had not been translated yet in Portuguese about 8-10 of them, I waited patiently for my turn... I had a plan. When it was my turn I told him who I was, Monica, the girl from the fax. He said something about getting my details but then went on signing books. There was a long queue. I let him sign all my books and then dived; because I could feel that soon he would be leaving, so I asked him if he'd have time to go for a drink. He agreed, but then his editor panicked because he was staying in Lausanne. I told him that I could drive him back, since I had to go through Lausanne to go back home anyway. He was thrilled and kept saying: I am going with Monica. We went for a drink with a few other people and then he came in my car. Pinch me I must be dreaming, it can't be true.... I asked him about the River mentioned in one of his books and

he said that it's a beautiful place and that he would bring me there one day. When we got to his hotel in Lausanne, we went in for a cup of coffee, and it was four o'clock before we were on our way home... He actually invited me to come to the book shop the following day and then to Paris for the weekend, I had a few plans but I cancelled everything of course. This was just unbelievable. I was so excited. As planned, I met him the next day at the book shop. He gave me the details of his flight and told me to organise a seat for myself. I called the airline. There was only one seat left in business class. I knew he would pay for my ticket, so I took it. When the book signing session was over at the bookshop, he got a car with the editor to go to the airport... for insurance reasons; they couldn't take me with them. I wish they had told me earlier.... I left the bookshop in a big rush and ran all the way to the train station, the train was leaving as I got there, but I managed to jump in and made it just in time to the airport...

I was off to Paris with the person I admire most. In Paris, we all went in a cab to go to the hotel. That evening we went out and met a group of friends and when everyone was leaving, he said, Monica stays with me—I was very happy and proud... That evening, he gave me a strange task; I had to charm a young man who was in our group. He was quite handsome, so it was not a bad task. On the Sunday morning, we first went to buy socks for him in a department store, then to la Chapelle de la Medaille Miraculeuse (a chapel in St Germain), where he put one of the medals in my hand (it's very special for me). We then we had a brunch where I met his master and other people. In the evening, he had an interview with a journalist so left me alone (I should probably have called the young man from the previous evening to find out if I had managed to charm him—at least he gave me his phone number, but I didn't). Instead, I wrote a letter to my favourite author, to thank

him for the opportunity he gave me to spend the weekend in Paris with him and get to know him a bit. The next day I was flying back to my normal life, but one of my dreams had come true... to say thank you for that, I decided to do the walk that his book (*The Pilgrimage*) was about. I asked him for help in planning it and that's when we started being in contact by email, which was great. I was touched that, with his busy schedule and life he found time to write to me (I kept all his messages.)...

I managed to catch up with him once more, in 1998, when he came to Australia. With the help of my husband Vince, I gave him some advice on the tentative programme he sent me. When he was in Sydney, where we then lived, we went out for dinner one night, and I saw him on one more occasion, a book signing session in a bookshop. Before he left, I gave him a small present and told him it was very symbolical, a boomerang, and then explained that they always come back. (Otherwise, it's not a boomerang, just a stick!!). He has not, returned yet though. When I saw him that time he asked me to do a test for him and translate about 40-50 pages of his latest book from Portuguese to English. I was more than happy to do that, although neither language is my mother tongue, and was thrilled at the idea of maybe getting the translation of the whole book, but it was not to be, which was probably not surprising.

We are still in touch nowadays, but not very often as he is a very busy man. And I am still waiting for him to return to Australia so we can catch up somehow. I know that one day he will.



EL CAMINO DE SANTIAGO

THE CAMINO DE Santiago is one of the 3 big Christian pilgrimages. One goes to Jerusalem, one to Rome and this one to Santiago de Compostela in Spain, where the remains of the Apostle St James lay. The same road/path has been walked for thousands of years by thousands of pilgrims from all over Europe. All the roads meet in the town of Puente la Reina. From where, there is only one road left that has been walked by all the pilgrims. It is quite a strange feeling when you walk and realise that you are walking in the steps of all these people. Like the poem about the Camino says: **Millares de peregrinos y mas de un millar de anos, Peregrino quien te llama, que fuerza occulta te atrae?** (thousands of pilgrims and over a thousand years, pilgrim what calls you? What power pulls and attracts you?)

I did not do this pilgrimage for religious reasons. I am not really a religious person. I firmly believe there is something, someone higher, but I would not know how to call Him/Her/It? There just has to be.

My reasons were spiritual, as well as my way to say thank you for having been able to meet my favourite author. Vince

was not overly excited about me doing it, but I told him that this was something I had decided to do before he came to visit, and that if I did not do it, I surely I would blame him one day.

The walk I did started in St Jean Pied de Port (a small town on the French side of the Pyrenees). I walked 800 km in 32 days. It's something very different when all you have to worry about is how far the day will bring you and where you will stop to sleep, how many new blisters you will have by the evening. 32 days with no television, no radio and not many newspapers. It's as if you are disconnected from the rest of the world, which is very unusual. You have all that time to admire the scenery, soak up the atmosphere and think. I kept in touch with people back home by calling my friend Francine about once a week to let her know where I was and how it was going. I left for this pilgrimage by myself, but out of 32 days of walking, I probably walked alone for only 3 or 4, and even then, I had to explain to my fellow pilgrims that I needed and wanted to walk alone and that we would meet again in the evening in one of the refuges. The Camino is pretty safe and locals protect pilgrims anyway. I met many little old ladies who wanted to shake my hand, offer me a drink of water and tell me that they would include me in their prayers, very touching. You can't get lost, because you follow the yellow arrows telling you how far you are from your objective and usually pilgrims have some sort of a guide book. I managed to get lost twice though, the first day and the last, but not for very long and I was never scared. Most of the 800km are in the bush, fields. Only 200km follow the road, and these are not fun, because walking on concrete is hard on your joints and because of the traffic. There are many heavy trucks coming quite fast and it is not a nice feeling when they pass you and you are shaken by the displacement of air it produces....

Once you start the Camino, you are not supposed to stop (quit) until you get there except for serious medical reasons. So every morning, you get up, get dressed, put your backpack on and start walking, whatever the weather, first looking for an open bar where to have a milk coffee and breakfast.

When you walk, you always carry some water, as well as a few snacks to eat as you go because you need to hold on until the main meal that will be dinner once you stop for the day.

I used to walk for 2-3 hours, then rest for a little while, 5-10 minutes and then start again. I had my camera, so I also stopped to quickly take pictures, which was a bit of an adventure, because my camera was in my backpack, so I had to put it down, retrieve the camera, take the picture and then put it away again. I was quite lucky with the weather, although at the beginning I caught a lot of rain. But because I did it in spring, I almost never had temperatures above 30 degrees. (polvo, barro, sol y lluvia es Camino de Santiago, as the above-mentioned poem starts), dust, mud, sun and rain, that's the road to Santiago.

All along the Camino, there are refuges for pilgrims where you can sleep in a dorm for a small amount. You just need to show your pilgrim passport (the refuges are for pilgrims only) and have it stamped. It's on a first arrived first served basis, so you don't want to get there too late or you might end up without a bunk. In the refuge, you can have a hot shower, wash your clothes if you want to and use the common kitchen to prepare your food.

After a while, you get into a routine. I used to get there, have a shower, change shoes, wash my clothes so that they would hopefully dry before the morning, and then find out with the other pilgrims what we could arrange for dinner. We used to cook and eat all together, I have many good memories of

meals and evenings we spent all together.

The pilgrimage is also a lot about the people you meet, and sharing experiences. You become quite close to some other pilgrims because you might end up in the same refuge a few nights in a row, or walk with them for a while. Even when you lose track of them because they are either ahead or behind, you know that sooner or later you will catch up, at the latest in Santiago.

We all have our own rhythm when we walk, and walking slower or faster is a lot harder, you need to go at your own pace, that's the most important thing to remember if you are planning to get there.

When the day of my departure arrived, a group of close friends came with me to the train station in my home town. I had my backpack and my walking stick (that my brother Luca had made for me, how thoughtful, his way to accompany me on this adventure), and I was as ready as I would ever be. There were strikes in France so I was not sure that I would get where I wanted to go, nor how far I would get. Luckily, my train was one of the very few that had not been cancelled, but the connecting train to St Jean Pied de Port had and I took a taxi with some other pilgrims. There, I found the lady to get my pilgrim passport. She was about to have lunch when I got there so she asked me to come back later, which I did. At some stage in the conversation, I mentioned my friend (the author) and she got quite upset, since she obviously did not like him (he mentions her in his book—*The Pilgrimage*)

As she had advised me to, I decided to start walking straight away, because I could get to a refuge that day and that would make it easier the next day. I left St Jean in the rain. I walked uphill for about 3–4 hours. When I got to the refuge there were already pilgrims there, but they agreed to share the one and only room with me. We had dinner all together

and then I went to bed early, because the next day would be a full day... After a good night's sleep. I woke up woke up in the morning to a view that was magic. I was just above the fog which covered the whole valley. It was beautiful. I had breakfast and started walking. At one stage I got lost, but not for long. It was going uphill for a very long time. That day I was crossing the Pyrenees, from France to Spain. And then it was down to Roncesvalles.

In Roncesvalles I met other pilgrims, among them Deb and Amador. We were all staying at the refuge. That evening, I went to mass. It was a service especially for pilgrims which included the benediction of the pilgrims. I would not go to mass again until I reached Santiago.

I didn't sleep very well, because I was cold. The next morning, Deb, Amador and I decided to walk together for a bit. We actually would go quite a long way together, but then Amador went ahead, because he needed to walk faster and Deb stopped, because she was only doing a small portion of the pilgrimage, planning to do a different part every year. I will not forget how I felt that second day when I woke up. I thought I wouldn't be able to get out of the bed, I was aching all over. After that first day crossing the Pyrenees, I realised that I would probably not get to Santiago with my backpack as it was (17kg). Too heavy, for a small person like me, so I left a few things behind in Roncesvalles, (a towel, a pair of runners and a pair of pants). I sent books and other things to myself in poste restante in Santiago, keeping just one guide. After that, I spent just over one month crossing Spain on foot.

One of my reasons to do this pilgrimage was to say thank you to have been able to meet my favourite author and become his friend. I guess I also wanted to find out if I would make it. Another challenge, for my challenged life (one that I chose, this time).

It was not easy, it can't be easy to walk 800kms, but it was my choice to do it and when I start something, I usually finish it. I suffered a lot, because I had blisters almost from the first day to the last, as well as pains in my joints, knees, hips, but, chin up, I kept going and took many anti-inflammatory tablets. I almost gave up once. The day I went past La Cruz de Hierro, the Iron Cross, where pilgrims are supposed to leave a stone they have brought with them from home as a symbol of their sins. I had 2 that I had picked by the lake where I was born and left them there, with many more that were already there. My blisters had just exploded and were very painful. When some other pilgrims I knew asked me how I was, I burst into tears and if there had been a bus then and there, I would have jumped aboard and given up. We were in the middle of nowhere, so I walked a little bit further, where there was a refuge, had a cup of coffee while someone had a look at my blisters and attended to them as best as they could. They offered to drive me to my destination, since they had to go there anyway (Ponferrada I think), but I refused—you have to do El Camino walking and I had sworn to myself earlier that I was going to do just that, even if it meant getting there on my knees (I once took a bus, because it was pouring down in the morning when I was about to start walking, and it turned out to be the right decision, because it was a 40km walk, and it poured all day. I felt guilty after though and that's when I made that promise to myself). The people from the refuge told me to stay on the road. It would be a bit longer, but it meant that they would drive past me and that I could stop them if I was in too much pain and changed my mind. I started walking again, and my blisters were not that painful anymore, so I kept going, caught up with some pilgrims who had stopped to have lunch, let them go ahead because I was walking slower than usual, and kept going. Later in the afternoon, I thought I had a

vision, because I saw someone walking the other way, towards me. That person looked very much like Andre, with whom I had been walking for a while but who had to go ahead, it was him indeed. The whole valley had by then heard of my misadventures, so he had decided to come back to the rescue. He offered to carry my backpack. I first refused but he insisted and I gave in. Walking without its weight was so much easier that it did not take us long to get to the refuge. He was sent by an angel that day. From then on, we walked together again, all the way to Santiago, even if here and there I asked him to let me walk alone for the day...it was the 3rd time he was doing the Camino, I was impressed. He had decided to look after me and make sure I would get there, and I did. Together, we entered the city of Santiago de Compostela, together we walked to the cathedral, and together we got in and went to the statue of St James where his remains are.

What did I learn? That I could do it, I doubted a few times, so I am stronger than I think. That if you really want something and keep "fighting" for it, you will get there eventually. It was a wonderful experience. I met wonderful people (some of whom I am still in contact with). I also realised that I could ignore pain to a certain extent. I had blisters from the beginning until I got there. I also had bad pain in my joints, knees and hips and very often when I woke up in the morning I could not move and walking was quite painful until my body warmed up and then it was ok.... I was walking short distances in the beginning about 15 km a day, but by the time I was nearing Santiago, it was more like 26 or more...up to 40 without trouble. I was nevertheless happy to get there. One of the first things I did was to buy new runners and throw my shoes away.

The feeling in Santiago was mixed. Happy to be there, happy to have made it, but sad to have to say goodbye to new friends, It was even harder for me, because I knew I was

going to emigrate to Australia shortly after, whereas if I had stayed in Switzerland there would be many people I would have been able to catch up with sooner or later...

Since I was in Spain and had a bit of time, there was another place I wanted to go to before going back home, a monastery and a river. I went there and enjoyed that beautiful place. I sat by the river, but did not weep.

In June 1997, after 32 days walking, I am back in Switzerland for a short time.



VINCE / AUSTRALIA

WHILST WORKING AT Nestle, I got a phone call, one day, asking me how my head was. I had no idea who I was talking to until he told me. It was a friend from Australia, Vince, to whom I had sent a fax earlier telling him I had fallen with my snowboard and hit my head, (We had been in touch in writing ever since we met at the beginning of 1994). He said he had to take some leave or he would lose it, so had decided it was about time he came to visit me in Europe. I told him he was welcome to do so, although I was not sure I would be able to take time off, because I wanted to keep my leave to do something special the following year. (The Camino, see above). He told me he would come in August. When I told a good friend of mine, she said "you'll see, you'll end up in Australia." "No way" I replied. And where am I?? After his phone call, I thought and decided I couldn't let him come from the other side of the world and not show him around a bit, so planned to take 2 weeks off. The day of his arrival, I was waiting at the airport in Geneva, a strange feeling in my tummy and wondering how I put myself in that position. All this because of a trip up the Amazon River a few years earlier and meeting and becoming

friends with an Australian couple. Vince had always been just a friend. The day he arrived after a 24 hour trip, I brought him to the market in my home town, then to my flat. I did not have a spare room, so he was to sleep on the couch in the lounge. That afternoon, we went to the lake. It was a beautiful summer day and I was working on my tan. Back then, I would sunbake topless., which is very common in Switzerland. I remember getting to the lake and having a terrible dilemma. What would he think if I took my top off? I decided I had to be myself, and I did, he might have been shocked, but why do things differently? I learnt from a friend that there was a free concert nearby that night, so we decided to go. We didn't want to take too many cars, so my friend offered to give us a lift. He came to collect us at my place in the evening. On the way there, we stopped in a beautiful spot in the vineyards overlooking the lake and smoked a joint. By then, Vince must have been really shocked. Never mind. This is who I was. The concert went on and on and was not that good. Poor Vince was starting to be exhausted, with jetlag followed by a long day, but we couldn't go home, we had to wait for my friend to be ready to leave. Vince got so tired that he went in the car and fell asleep there. We eventually went home, pretty late or was it early?

The next day we went to my parents' chalet up in the mountains where I lived for many years, for lunch. It was funny, because my parents don't speak English, but because Vince spoke a dialect, they were nevertheless able to understand each other, and made me laugh a lot (Vince's Italian is a dialect and I couldn't understand a word of what he said). He made a good impression and we had a very nice time. We even went in the forest in the afternoon mushroom hunting, a first for Vince and found a reasonable amount of porcini mushrooms. Something quite special for someone from Australia. That night, we took the night train to Rome (a 12

hour trip). We stayed in Rome for a few days, clicked, and did all the touristy things. We then carried on our Italian tour to Venice, then Florence and Tuscany (Siena, Luca, and later Verona as well). After being back in Switzerland for a short time, as I had to get back to work, we went to Paris for a week end. Vince won't forget a very long walk we did looking for a chapel I visit every time I am in Paris (the one where the author who touched my heart put the medal in my hand). What happened is that we got off the subway at the wrong stop. Poor Vince ended up with blisters.

We then went back to Switzerland; I had to get back to work. Some of my friends looked after Vince during the day and showed him a bit around. One day, he went mushroom hunting with my mum. My mum really liked him but when I told her that I might leave again to go and live in Australia, she didn't like him that much anymore (because she didn't want me to go and live so far away ?).

Vince left to go back to his normal life. I guess the timing for his first visit had been right because I was no longer in a relationship, I had split up with Fabrice again earlier, I was getting more mature and ready to settle down and start a family. So was he. The rest is history.

When he left, we knew that we had 2 options; either treat our story like a summer love and go back to our lives, or one of us would have to leave his/her country to go and live in the other's.

Because I had been travelling so much in the previous years (in the previous 5 years, I had been away for 3), my family was used to not having me around. I was also fluent in English, which was not the case for Vince with French and he had a good job back home, and Australia is not a bad place to move to.

He came again for Christmas, only 3 months after his first

trip, and experienced a little bit of a Swiss winter, lots of snow and skiing in the Swiss/French Mountains, once with a temperature of minus 16 degrees. The Alps are very high compared to Australian mountains, that I teasingly call hills. (We skied at over 3,000m ...) During his stay, Vince proposed, and I started the long procedure to get a migrant visa for Australia. He came again at Easter. By then I had been granted a prospective spouse, temporary resident visa, after lots of paperwork, interviews, a medical check, and police clearance and so on.

I was quite shocked with some of the things we had to provide during the process (i.e. phone bills to prove we were calling each other, letters, and emails and so on). I had to censor some parts of my emails because they contained comments, not always very nice, about the woman in charge of my file at the Australian embassy.

We got frustrated a few times. I had no reason to leave my country, except to be able to be with Vince. I had a good job, a good life and Switzerland is a nice country.

In July of 1997, it was my turn to travel to Australia. A few months later, in December, we got married. The day after the wedding, to meet the DIMA's (Department of Immigration and Migratory Affairs) deadline, I had to lodge my application for permanent residency, just a formality, and it was granted. 2 years later I applied for citizenship. And I am now Australian as well as Swiss, because I didn't give up my Swiss citizenship. And when people ask me, I can tell them I am Australian. I even had the operation, (this is a joke people tell about becoming an Australian, meaning you had to have some of your brain removed in order to become one, about reducing your mentality I think). I can even prove it and show the big scar on my head...

After many farewell parties with all my friends I am off again,

to Australia this time. There is a farewell committee composed of all my close friends at the airport with signs saying that they love me and so on and huge cow bells (very Swiss). I have wonderful friends and I will miss them dearly. From Geneva to London I cried, it wasn't easy to leave my country.

Then from London to Sydney I slept (I had to catch up on a fair bit of sleep, because I had been partying a lot before my departure); the guy next to me was disgusted...

I arrived in Sydney on July 19, 1997. I was arriving from the European summer to the Australian winter, and although it is nothing compared to the Swiss winter (lots of snow and very cold), I suffered from the cold a lot on arrival. In Europe, it is very cold, but every house has central heating and is nice and warm (so much that I used to sleep with my window slightly ajar all year round and you are in a T-shirt inside and rug up to go out).

I was freezing in our Sydney apartment. I would be all right outside and then come in and put on a big jumper (not the other way round). I spent a lot of time sitting very close to the heater, and caught a cold as a result. Along with a bad fever.

It took me a couple of months to get a job. I declined one that would have been interesting because of its location (a bit far from where we lived and not easily accessible by public transport).

I hated the one I accepted. It was boring and my colleagues were not even nice. When I got pregnant, about 6 months later, I couldn't wait to tell them. I also said that they didn't need to keep the job for me, because I would not be coming back.

From my arrival, we were busy preparing our wedding. On December 20, we got married in a garden in Adelaide. We had a nice day with our friends and family from all over Australia, some from Switzerland, as well as Mrs. Pandit from India (the

lady I lived with in Delhi, how sweet of her to have managed to come). Our wedding was very simple. The ceremony with a marriage celebrant in a garden and the reception, catered for, at Vince's sister and brother-in-law's place after all, it was all their fault. Everybody had a great time, and so did we...

We then stayed in Adelaide until after Christmas with some friends who came for the wedding. On Boxing Day, we drove to Melbourne with a couple of Swiss friends (my dear friend Francine and her partner). We stopped in the Grampians NP and a few other places. We spent New Year's Eve together in Melbourne and on January 2 we were off to Tasmania for our honeymoon. Our friends kept the car and were going to drive it back to Sydney where we would see them again before they flew back home. I clearly remember our advice: whatever you do, don't crash the car. We had only been in Hobart for 2 days when we got a phone call, and yes, they had crashed the car.

That was very bad news, because it was a company car, and we should not have lent it to them in the first place. We cancelled all the reservations for our honeymoon, organised our flights and... went back to Sydney where we rented a car and drove for many hours to go and rescue them and see the extent of the damage. Poor TPV 309... All our wedding presents were in the car, so we put them in the rental car and we were off again.

Vince then had to organise for the car to be repaired, and all without his employer finding out that we had lent it. A bit stressful, but we got there. Our friends will never forget their trip to Australia, it cost them a fortune, because they toured quite a bit and then they paid for the repairs...

The sad part is that our honeymoon that was supposed to last 2 weeks all over Tasmania was cut short to 2 days only. One day we will go back.

Just under a year after we got married, Sarah was born (17/12/98). She changed our life completely because from then on everything was centred around her...in January 2000 we moved to Melbourne for a year (due to Vince's job). That's where Lucas was born on 7th October. There are now 4 people in our little family: Sarah, Lucas, Vince and Monica, all born in a different place, Adelaide, Sydney, Melbourne and Vevey, Switzerland...quite unusual... If we ever decided to have another child, we'd have to move to another state...

It was quite a challenge with two children, I remember thinking: "and I thought it was hard with one". Vince was then working full time and I was the one in charge of everything for the kids and the household, as I have always been until I had the aneurysm. We moved back from Melbourne to Sydney in January 2001 and started talking about moving to South Australia to go and live close to Vince's family in Adelaide, so that the kids would have at least one side of the family close by (family is important), and also because Adelaide is a nicer city to live in with a young family. We went there on a holiday at Easter 2002. We looked at a few houses to have an idea. Saw a very nice one and ended up buying it. I remember that when we started talking about moving to Adelaide, I said, OK but with one condition, I want a sandstone or bluestone house (I have always loved them). We saw many, but they always had something wrong: not the right floor plan and they were usually quite dark inside and I didn't like that. Back in Sydney we had to sell our house to have the money to pay for the one in Adelaide and it was a pretty stressful time, our real estate agent was an idiot and I even ended up in tears once, but eventually everything ended up turning out fine...

In June 2002 we moved to Adelaide. We didn't know it then, but we had a few hard years ahead of us. Vince couldn't get a job in his field for a long time; I never thought that would be

a problem. I started to work soon after we moved, for a small research company in North Adelaide where I was in charge of all the admin. It was only casual work, one day per week and very flexible which was perfect for me. With 2 small children, it's almost impossible to have a full time job and you need flexibility to be able to stay home if someone gets sick and so on.

Vince eventually got into handyman work (just as well he doesn't only have a brain, but two hands as well). In early 2005, he finally got something in his field of expertise, but just a couple of months later, I had the aneurysm and he had to resign, because he had 3 people to look after, me and our 2 children, and there was no way he could work as well. Very bad timing... He kept his job for a couple of months, but it was madness to keep on working.

10

APRIL 13, 2005 — THE DAY MY WORLD COLLAPSED

In the blink of an eye, in a heartbeat, all was changed forever.

How can one moment divide my life so acutely between then and now, between who I was and who I am, between what was, what no more is and will never be again.

Extract from "Recovery, journey to healing" by Bev Aisbett

AFTER MY DAY at work, at 3pm, I went to school to pick up my daughter Sarah. As we were crossing the oval to go back to my car, and then get Lucas from childcare, I collapsed. Sarah told me later, when I asked her to tell me what happened that day that she talked to me but I could not talk anymore. Then she tried to help me get up, but I couldn't. Luckily, people around me when it happened, reacted very quickly and called an ambulance, so that within minutes I was in the emergency room at the Royal Adelaide Hospital.

I don't have any memory of these events; all I am writing is based on what I have been told.

(The school contacted Vince who was on a business trip in Melbourne to let him know what had happened). He was told I had fallen so had no idea if I had simply tripped over or what. A friend picked up Sarah, then went to the childcare centre to get Lucas and brought them to their place, where they stayed for a few nights. Right up until take-off, Vince was on the phone with the neurosurgeon at the hospital, starting to understand how serious my condition was, understanding that I had not just tripped over, but that it was a lot worse than a strained ankle. He called his sister so that a family member be there with me. She was the one who had to agree to the emergency surgery. I spent about 5 hours in the operating room, (not that I remember, of course...) to avoid brain pressure with the swelling and to get to my brain to clip the aneurysm and stop the haemorrhage—I had a craniotomy where a piece of my skull was removed. It would take months with a skull cap before my bone was put back. Even after surgery, I was not in pain. The brain is actually an organ that cannot feel pain, and I was comatose anyway. The pain, more mental than physical, came much later, when I started to understand my predicament. I have no memory of what happened and of the first weeks afterwards, not until much later in the rehab centre, where I started to understand that I had completely lost control of my life. When I realised that the left side of my body was not responding and was paralysed I was in shock.

I remember thinking that the doctors were idiots, what did they do to my brain, it was working pretty well before, why did they touch it? It took me a while to understand that I had almost died and that those idiots actually saved my life.

At the beginning when I was in the rehab centre, I spent

days, weeks, even months crying, as I was realising how bad I was.

I don't think I was ever in denial, because how could I deny something that was so obvious. I couldn't move. Interestingly, I was never in pain, so was always able to work as hard as I could in physio and so on. Just once in physio did my shoulder hurt as we were trying to put my arms right up.

I think that all the crying I did in those first few months was my way of grieving for my many losses and try to accept them before being able to decide to get on with life.

It took me some time to turn that corner. I eventually did and have been getting better ever since. I am quite cheerful again. I transformed my sadness into determination to recover and get where I want to be. For a long time, though, it was impossible to talk to me without me bursting into tears. I'd cry even for a simple "good morning, how are you?"

I warned the nursing staff at the centre to not be nice with me or I would cry again. I used many boxes of tissues. Not only would I have tears rolling down my cheeks, I would sob, weep, it was a disaster. I couldn't talk anymore, couldn't even breathe. It must have been really hard for people around me as well.

This situation is very hard and it had then just hit me. I have been very independent since I was 19, and to have to rely and depend on others so much is awful. I sometimes feel like life does not make sense. I used to look after my family and our house, I had the situation under control and was doing a good job, I think. Now I can't obviously do that anymore... I was in charge of everything (the household, as well as the primary carer for the kids), quite busy. Sometimes I think I should have died, I am not a normal human being any more, and I am just another complication for my family... It took me a long time, but I finally turned that corner too, and understood

that there is life after brain injury, not life as you know it, but life nevertheless and that I had to keep faith and hope in my heart to make it to where I want to be.

The staff in the rehab centre managed to see my smile here and there and maybe even heard me laugh a few times. I guess I am a lot nicer to be around now. I still have my bitter sense of humour; it might even be getting bitterer.

My injury being on the right side of my brain, has not affected the language skills or memory. My speech is not as good as in the past, but only because it has become very nasal (I was nasal even before, because of my French accent). It is even more nasal now because my soft palate muscles are not working at 100%. I have to speak slowly so that people can understand me properly.

This is very much against my nature, especially because everything sounds perfectly clear in my head. I am getting better, though and can actually now hear it when I go too fast and it becomes blurred, which I couldn't do before. An improvement. As I keep saying and thinking, the good news is I can only get better, and I will get there.

My disability is mainly physical. Because I don't know what it would be like to struggle with my memory or not be able to think properly anymore, nor be able to find the right words to express what I want, I can't say which is worse. All I know is that I find my situation extremely hard.

It might be easier for friends and other people to relate to me though, because I am still the same person. When I say that I am just the shadow of the woman I used to be, I get the same reaction every time: "no you're not". I can still think and be coherent, read, write, talk and remember things, so I guess I am the same person, even if it doesn't feel like that when you are in my shoes. I think, therefore I am. My body is not responding though, I have lost control,—Help!! I used to be so well or-

ganised, efficient and quick in everything I did and now I am so dependent. I remember getting very upset one day, when Vince came to visit me at the centre and told me my driving license had been cancelled, which is routine procedure with brain injury. I was horrified. How dare they do that to me...? Not that I could drive anyway. I would not be able to change gears, and I know it would be dangerous, because I have lost the peripheral vision on the left for both eyes... If I don't get it back, I might never get my license back either.

As a friend from overseas who came over at the beginning of 2006 told me when I said that the Monica of his memories would be back, he said that she was back already, if she ever left, and that she is only moving slower. Another friend told me that when she looked in my eyes, it was still me she saw, and another one when she visited me at the rehab centre, quite early on, put her head through the door of my room and asked if she could kiss me. Of course, I said, it is not contagious. I then knew it was still you she said. It's reassuring to know that I am still here, even if quite different. Like someone else told me: you are not worse, you are just different". I am still fluent in 4 languages. As I like to put it, my earthly envelope (my body) is damaged, but there is much more to a person than just a body. My spirit is untouched. My memory is intact, although I can't remember the period before the aneurysm ruptured and a few weeks after. I complained about severe headaches for 3 days, they must have been very bad, because I am not one to complain, but all that is gone. As are the 5 weeks I spent in hospital, first in intensive care, then step down and finally in the normal neurology ward, and the first few weeks in the centre.

When I pray, which I do regularly; I am always thankful that it happened when it did and that nothing happened to my

children, they have their whole lives ahead of them. It could have happened while I was driving with the kids in the car, or home alone. The Neurosurgeon said that had I arrived in hospital one hour later I would not have survived. I guess it was not my hour to go yet... I am not afraid of dying. I don't think death is the end anyway. I think it is just a transition. I believe in reincarnation, and I believe this is not my first life. Imagine if it had happened the night before. Vince was interstate on business. It could have happened in my sleep and the kids would have found me dead in my bed the next morning. That could be a very traumatising experience. I am so grateful they didn't have to experience that.

When I think of all the books about near death experiences I read when I was a teenager, it doesn't seem fair. I got very close to dying, but never saw the light of love, nor the tunnel. I guess that if I had, I might not be here now, writing. I also think that what gave me the strength to get out of the coma were my children, because I believe they need a mother, even just a fragment of a mother. If I had then known what a long and tough journey it was going to be to bring me where I want to be, I might have given up then. I didn't though and I have now come a very long way already, so I am not about to give up now. If I was going to give up, I would have done it at the beginning, when I was in a coma.

11

HOSPITAL AND REHABILITATION

I DON'T REMEMBER anything about the fateful day my life was shattered, the day everything changed forever, or the following weeks for that matter, but I guess I spent most of the time sleeping anyway, drifting in and out of consciousness... I am still trying to understand how things happened, because I would like to know. How did Vince tell my family in Switzerland and Italy what had happened, how did the kids react, and so on. The communication obviously worked well, because friends and family very quickly got organised to come here. Vince told me I was in a coma and on life support for a while. (Had I not been in a coma "naturally", it would probably have been induced, as it is important for the brain to not have too much activity in order to recover). I wanted to know for how long I was in a coma, and so on. It is very confusing to not know some of these details, even if they are not important anymore. The story is I almost died, but managed to survive somehow. I have the feeling I have completely lost control of my life (which is probably true to some extent, and it is a not a good feeling)...

My immediate memory might not be as good as it used

to be. If I want to remember something now, I have to tell myself that I want to remember, and then it's fine. Not too bad I guess... At least I don't need to write everything down.

I also can't multitask the way as I used to. If I am very concentrated on a task, I might be oblivious of other things happening around me, which can be tricky with small children, but all in all, my brain is still working pretty well, except to transmit orders to my left limbs. As the neurosurgeon told me on a follow up visit, there is nothing wrong with my intellect. Another friend said when I told him I didn't get the new brain I asked for Christmas and was therefore stuck with mine: "it's not such a bad thing to be stuck with, it's quick, it's got in-depth and it is always very active". A brain can learn again, which is what my brain is doing right now, and I will get there, or close, it is just a slow process, and, therefore a matter of time. The human body can create a new liver in a couple of weeks. It does the impossible quickly, but miracles take a bit longer (the brain is a bit more complex than a liver after all). (I need a lot of patience, courage and perseverance and determination). I think I am doing pretty well, even if I'd love the process to be a lot faster especially because I have always been a fast person in all aspects of my life. I am definitely learning to slow down... (Speed kills I am told).

I started writing this when I was in the Rehab Centre, early on, because I had too much time, it gave me something to do when I had no therapy, in order not to be bored and because what I was experiencing was too hard, I was quite depressed and I had to get it off my chest somehow.

At the beginning, it was mainly about the brain injury, the little I understood and how I was feeling, but that pretty sad and gloomy and you can only write that you wished you had died so many times and then you realise you have to find something else to write about. I looked back at my life, realised

that it was quite interesting and full of many experiences, challenges and achievements. I therefore decided to write about that instead. The brain injury can't be ignored, though, because it is part of it unfortunately. It completely shattered my life and that of my family. It has to be the challenge of my life.

Sometimes, I feel guilty for what we all have to go through, but it's not my fault, I certainly did not ask for that. Still, it is hard to not be able to be the mum I used to be, full of life and smiles and laughs and my children are too young to really understand what has happened to me.

They can see I am not the same person anymore, but they probably don't understand why. They don't understand why it is taking me so long to get better (it's not a cold I'm recovering from). I hope they realise how hard I am working to be the mum of their memory again.

This is driving me mad. I want to be able to resume my role as the head of the household and have it the way I like. I want to get my life back under control. So I can have a more active role with my children again, chase my son in the backyard as he wants me to and take some weight off Vince's shoulders.

I don't think the kids suffered much under the circumstances, because they were always looked after, fed, and so on by their dad, but they must have been scared when I was in intensive care, between life and death, although they probably don't understand death that well.

I feel bad for them, although they still have a mother. It's so hard to be a passenger...At least I am here to see them grow. A fragment of a mother is better than no mother, isn't it?

As I tell them regularly, I still have feelings, my heart is fine. I love them more than anything in the world and desperately need their love too.

On April 13, 2005, I suffered a ruptured cerebral aneurysm and I have been on the road to recovery since (that's just over

18 months now). Not very long in the big picture of recovering from a brain injury, but a very long time for me, the longest 18 months of my life. First I was in a coma for about a week, in intensive care, then step down and then the neurology ward. This is definitely the hardest experience of my life so far and I can't imagine having to experience anything harder than this. We all have our cross to bear. This is mine.

I was told that the Lord won't give us a load that we can't bear; I sometimes think he might have overestimated my strength.

I am making good progress, a remarkable recovery I am told, but it is a lot slower than what I would like.

I have been looking for the fast forward button in my brain for a long time, but can't find it.

I can't find the reset one either (but that one might not be that helpful anyway, I would not want to lose everything).

As for the back up, I have misplaced the DVDs...

When you are used to being completely independent, and have been like that for most of your life, not to be able to pull up your sleeve or scratch your arm is very frustrating.

It's unbelievable how many things we need 2 hands for... you don't realise this until you only have the use of one.

It's always like this though, isn't it? You don't realise what you have until you lose it.

After the aneurysm ruptured, I was in the intensive care ward of the hospital for a while, about a week, with drips in my arms, a tube in my nose and on life support. I kept removing the drips and tubes because they annoyed me. In one day, I removed them 6 times. Each time, they had to bring me to radiology as they had to use x-rays to check they are re-inserting the tube properly, so they ended up tying my hands.

I then was promoted to the step down ward and finally to the normal neurology ward.

I was in the RAH for about 5 weeks and I have almost no memory of it at all. My dear friend Eva was here and spent a lot of time with me but I can't remember a thing. I was told, though, that when she was with me I was alert and talked to her, etc. My speech would have been pretty bad back then. (I wonder how she understood me). When I was in the rehab centre, I sent her an email, to say how bad I felt about not remembering anything and she replied that she could not have imagined not coming and that she even thought that I might not recognise her because I was heavily medicated. Luckily this was never an issue.

The only memories I have of my stay in hospital is when the physios were putting me on an armchair with the lifter and telling me to sit nice and tall. It was so hard and tiring, hard to believe, I just wanted to be put back in my bed.

I also remember that one of the nurses was my guardian angel. I was so cold at night. He kept bringing me hot blanket after hot blanket. I would have so many by the morning that I would not be able to move.

My great niece came to visit one day with her boyfriend. I asked for a pad and pen and wrote "I will be back" on it.

My mum came from Switzerland with my aunt Laura (her sister) from Italy in June; I must have given a very bad scare to my mum, because I was starting to believe that she would never come to visit. I am so happy that she came, because now I know she will come again, because she knows it is a long trip, yes, but it's manageable. Both my mum and aunty were good help for Vince. My mum is a very good cook and I think she did most of the cooking while she was here, for the enjoyment of Vince and the kids.

She also kept the house clean, reorganised my kitchen, as did all the following visitors. (The first thing I did when I was discharged from the rehab centre was to organise it again...)

My mum and aunty obviously spent a lot of time with me at the centre, that's what they came for after all. They were actually in the physio room with me when I took my first 3-5 steps (with my physio on my left and a quad stick, but still, I walked). I was so happy I had tears in my eyes. They were closely followed by my friend Anne, and then my cousin Elisa who came for 6 weeks in July (so we had people over for about 2 ½ months). Elisa and I are very close, more like sisters than cousins. We spent a lot of time together in our childhood (see "growing up"). She was very dedicated during her stay and spent the whole day, almost every day with me at the Centre. We would just chat, try to remember songs from our summers at the beach, sing them, or talk about common memories and some of the silly things we did in our youths, we'd do some beading together, or she'd take me outside in my wheelchair for a ride and a breath of fresh air. She also regularly gave my left hand a massage. I remember one afternoon I came back to my room after some therapy and she had left for the day. She had put a note on my pillow for me, it said: "good night, sleep tight, see you tomorrow, I love you". It made me cry. I cried a lot too when it was time to farewell her. Thank you so much for coming and spending all that time with me, it was wonderful to have you by my side.

My dear friend Eva was the first one to come to the rescue, while I was still in hospital, and not well at all... (She was the first ten years ago too, when I came back from Brussels with a broken heart after splitting up with Laurent.

She understood back then in my very short email that something was not right and quickly came to my office. We went to a conference room together and I cried on her shoulder).

I'm lucky to have a wonderful family and friends. As one of the nurses in the rehab centre once told me, statistically, I have got everything to make a good recovery:

- I am young, (more or less, at least I feel young in my heart)
- I have got family
- I have got friends
- I am motivated

I want to wake up and think I had an awful nightmare. That would be wonderful, although I know it is not going to happen. One can dream... I believe in miracles, but as my OT told me, there are small miracles every day, and she is right, the brain takes time to train/learn again and nerves grow, but slowly. Do I have to relearn all the things it took 40 years to learn in the first place?? This is not funny;

This is too hard. Sometimes I wish I had died then there would be no problem anymore.

I know Vince gets upset when I say that, but it's so hard that it is probably quite normal to sometimes feel like that. I am a lot better in that respect too.

In the rehab centre, for a long time, not a day went by without me thinking this at some stage. It still sometimes crosses my mind, but not too often and I don't cry a lot anymore.

I have come a long way since intensive care in the hospital but when I look ahead, the road is still very long and since I don't remember how bad I was, I don't realise the progress I have made. After a few weeks at the hospital, I graduated to the rehab centre.

Now a word about the rehab Centre where I spent 5 months. Everybody was wonderful during my stay and I want to thank them all. As I wrote on my thank you card on discharge: we have travelled the first small part of my long road to recovery together and I will never forget that. The nurses and therapists all know that the objective is to go back home at some stage so they really push patients to do as much as they can independently, but they are also caring and supportive. Towards the end of my stay, when I had my shower in the morning, all

the nurse needed to do was transfer me on a shower chair and wheel me to the shower. If I had my body wash, washers and towels I was able to do all the rest by myself and then might need some help to finish dressing up. I was ok with the upper body, but not with the lower and found the way they were trying to teach me to get dressed by myself, lying on the bed, very unladylike, to say the least, so refused to even try. I remember getting very frustrated sometimes and saying things like "why does everything have to be so bloody hard?" At that stage, I still couldn't put my left shoe by myself because of my AFO (Ankle Foot Orthotic). Not bad, though, considering that when I arrived at the Centre, a lifter first, then 2 persons were needed for things as simple as transfers. Everybody at the centre was wonderful. They are used to dealing with people with brain injuries all the time, so they know what they are doing. It is only when you are in such a unit that you realise how common a brain injury is. It's scary. Many of those, especially for young people are due to road accidents, but I also found out that cerebral aneurysms are quite common, as are strokes, resulting in similar disabilities. Everybody knows someone who had a similar problem, and so on. I had never heard anything about it until it happened to me, and needless to say that I would have preferred to never know anything about it, but I have become quite an expert on the subject...

Because brain injury is the area they are specialised in, they know what they are dealing with and it is reassuring to be in very competent hands.

Although I was already better when I arrived at the rehab centre, I can't remember much of the first weeks of my stay. My first memory must be of a nurse sitting in the armchair by my bed and comforting me. Staff also used to come in my room regularly, flash a little light in my eyes, ask me where I was, the date, the day or the year, my name, who the prime

minister was or why I was there, and so on. I also remember that I would be exhausted after a one-hour physio session. I used to have a bit of a rest in the afternoon, a good way to kill a few hours.

One thing I remember is that I was always able to wipe my bottom by myself (maybe not in intensive care though). I might have needed help to transfer to the toilet but I was fine after, I was able to pull my pants down and up by myself.

I actually couldn't wait to get the green light to go by myself and transfer alone. Before that happened, I would get upset if the nurse who accompanied me to the toilet would not come back when I rang the bell. There are nicer places to be left than the toilet. So a few times, I didn't wait and got back on my wheelchair by myself, later telling the nurse in question that if I fell, it would be her fault for not coming when I rang. It was always safety first. As the nurses used to joke, you can't fall, too much paperwork if you do. Well, then, don't leave me in the toilet, especially if I have told you that I won't be long.

There was quite a routine at the centre. Between 7 and 7.30 it's wake up, have a shower and get dressed, usually nice comfortable clothes for therapy sessions, then breakfast and from then the therapy, different every day. I had various therapies: physio, speech, O.T., rec., sport, hydro. At the beginning of my stay, I used to be surprised at the amount of speech therapy I was getting. I didn't understand why. I was more interested in physio. Lunch around 1pm then more therapy in the afternoon, or a rest or visitors, dinner at 6pm. I was usually quite relieved after dinner because then another day was over and I could just go to bed. We all had a TV set in our room; everybody had a room for themselves,

I got to the centre by ambulance (that gives an idea of how bad I was. It was only about a month after the aneurysm ruptured).

I had quite a big room, because a lifter was needed to move me. When that wasn't necessary anymore and I was able to transfer with two people, I was moved to a smaller room, to leave the other one for someone who needed a lifter.

After a while, I was allowed to use a wheelchair. I needed the help of 2 people to transfer from my bed to it, but once I was in it, I could go where I wanted. Because of the loss of the vision on the left, I had a tendency to run into things on my left, so was forever reminded to scan by the staff.

I was always extremely careful of other patients, but quite often ran into the tea trolley or took a left corner a bit too tight and hit the wall. My main rule on the wheelchair was to always give way to people walking.

On my wheelchair, I was taken a few times by staff on an orientation tour and asked to find the physio room, the dining room, the nurses' station, the computer room and so on, just to make sure I had an idea of where I was, and where rooms were. I never had trouble with that.

I also remember the noises. From my room, I'd hear the tea trolley coming, the meals (and then I'd know it was time to go to the dining room), the bells of other patients calling (my neighbour kept ringing the bell and the nursing staff got quite annoyed one day, after answering it for the nth time and told her that if she needed something, she had to wheel herself to the nurses station).

I don't think I was ever a pain. I didn't ring the bell very often, only when I really needed something. I could also hear the alarm of the door close to my room when someone attempted to "escape", or just people talking in the corridor. My door and curtains would always be open except at night when I was asleep. I enjoyed looking at, and listening to, what was happening in the corridor and on the ward. It gave me something to do and I liked the "action".

I was just across from the “drug” room, so I would always know which registered nurse was on drug duty. I even cracked the code of the door.

I also remember questioning the drugs I was given. I once asked what one was for and was told it was anti seizure. I am not epileptic I said. I was a good girl and took it nevertheless, but I refused the Panadol they were giving me all the time, I was not in any pain.

I was quite lucky and never had to take many drugs.

The muscles in my left leg had shortened, making it impossible for me to put my left foot flat on the ground, so it was always pushing me off balance. To try to get it flat, I had 5 casts in a row (I could not sleep at night). The weight of the cast would wake me up every time I tried to roll over or change position.

I ended up begging them to leave me alone and find someone else to torture. In the end they listened to my complaints, because the last cast was removable and I could take it off at night (and therefore sleep). I would then put it on again in the morning after my shower. I used to call it my “glass slipper”.

I also had Botox injections in my calf muscles twice and spent hours strapped on the tilt table. It didn’t turn out to be enough.

I ended up having surgery to lengthen my Achilles tendon many months later.

After being promoted to be allowed to use a wheelchair, as long as I kept scanning, I was allowed to walk in the ward with one person for stand by assistance, i.e. to catch me in case I was about to fall. That was wonderful. I enjoyed being able to walk to the dining room for meals and even managed to never fall (or was it the nursing staff that was always able to catch me??) I sure put them to the test a few times. I enjoyed it so much that I would have spent hours walking in circles in

the ward if the nursing staff had had time to walk with me, because I was not allowed to walk by myself, yet, of course. That was very frustrating, especially when I wanted to go to the toilet which was just across my room... Yes, I did it a few times, when I rang and no one came.

I got upset a few times, when I would get back to my room after breakfast and notice that my bed had been made and my buzzer put away, out of reach, of course. I think I ended up putting a note on it with sticky tape, to please leave it where I can reach it without breaking my neck in the process. How was I supposed to call when I needed something? What I used to do was wheel myself to the nurses' station and ask someone to give me the buzzer that I would then leave on my bed.

I had a nice room, full of flowers and get well cards, drawings from my kids, pictures of them and so on, showing me all the time how much people cared and were with me in thoughts. All the kids in my daughter's class made a get well card for me, some with questions about what it was like at the centre, so I started writing to them and the teacher would read them my letter. My daughter's teacher was wonderful and really took my daughter under her wing when this happened. My daughter's way to deal with it somehow was to dive in her studies and the teacher understood that.

After a while, and a few home visits with various therapists to make sure I would be safe, I was allowed to go home.

It started with visits of a couple of hours, then the whole day, and then the weekend. It was good to be home, escape hospital food, but it was hard at the same time. There was not much I could do (I was still in a wheelchair for the first visits), so it was also very frustrating and depressing. We were lucky and didn't have to make too many changes in the house. We put a rail in the toilet and one in the shower and got rid of a

small step at the back. Luckily, our house is on one level only.

The next important step, I guess, was to get my bone back. Finally, my head would be whole again. To put my bone back, they had to shave my head again. At least after that I knew I could have a proper haircut and start growing it again. And, I could also get rid of the skull cap. My hair will only take 2 years to get to where it was before the aneurysm ruptured. Hopefully by then many other things will be back to where they were before.

I was in a lot of pain in recovery; and they had to give me morphine and then Panadeine Forte every 4 hours. It was funny, because at one stage I was in pain again, so asked for some Panadeine. It was only 3 hours though, so they refused but offered morphine instead. I was quite surprised and decided to suffer in silence and wait another hour for the Panadeine. By the evening, I was walking down the corridor with a nurse. I was still quite sore the next day, but fine shortly after, not even needing to take painkillers. I had a drain on my head which was very uncomfortable, but they removed it the next day already which was good (although it hurt badly when they did).

I was back in the rehab Centre, after a very short stay in hospital. Just getting dressed in the morning and walking to the dining room was very enjoyable, as well as having therapy again, being able to go to the computer room and have my own room.

The scar healed nicely and about two weeks later they were able to take out the many stitches. I was looking pretty normal again, (not that I have ever been normal anyway... as my cousin would say). The swelling due to surgery was gone and I just had an extravagant hair cut (half of the head shaved and some sort of Mohawk on top...) I quite liked it and I hadn't decided what I would do with it yet. I thought I might shave

the other side, keep the Mohawk but shorter and have a rat's tail as well. If I shaved the other side it would give my hair a chance to grow overall at the same time.

And that's exactly what I did. A friend told me when he saw the picture that I must be the coolest mum at school, but I don't think the children liked it that much... I thought, for a while of having green and orange streaks on the Mohawk, but in the end didn't. I'm not sure my kids would have been impressed.

As the weeks went by, the centre's staff started talking about discharge. I wanted to go home, of course, but I was also terribly scared,

On October 12, 2005 I was discharged from the rehab centre and sent home. I was very scared, and I said it to the staff there. I also asked: "what if it is a disaster?" and they said that if they thought it would be a disaster, they would not discharge me. Thank you for the vote of confidence, "but I am still shit scared" was my reply. It's such a challenge to go back home and leave the protected environment of the centre. When I walked out of the centre, I was crying (I never thought I'd cry when I was discharged...). When I first got there, I said that I would leave running. I could not do that, but at least I walked out and one day I will go back to say hello and run... All the people in the centre were very supportive and kind to me, and when you spend 5 months somewhere as an in-patient, friendships are bound to emerge.

One thing I knew for sure was that I would not miss the food. I would look at the menu in the morning and despair. How much steamed pumpkin can one eat? It seemed to come back for every meal.

I just could not eat it anymore (and they sure knew how to cook the crap out of it).

I used to simply strike it out on my menu, and choose a yo-

gurt, a banana and a piece of bread. Not much, I know, but then at least I would eat it.

The food would definitely be the one and only thing I could complain about.

When I got home, the kids had prepared a Welcome Home Mum Banner which was very sweet. OK, now let's try to put our lives back together...

I know it will take some time for the kids to get used to have me around again, and I have lost all my authority... years of hard work with the kids gone out of the window..., very frustrating. My relationship with them might never be the same again. "A fragment of a mother is better than no mother", though. I read somewhere that the first 3 years are when you lay the foundations of who someone will be. That's good, at least I was there for them then, the foundations are there.

The following week I started my BIRCH (Brain Injury Rehab Community / Home) programme in the outpatient centre. Once again, all these people are professionals specialising in brain injury, and some volunteers were actually in the Centre as patients in the past. It's good to see that they are in control of their lives again.

There is light at the end of the tunnel, and it is not a train coming in the other direction. I was in very good hands again. I used to go to the Centre Mon, Tue, Wed—Thur was my rest day and I had mainly home visits on Friday, as well as a few sessions at the centre. After some time, since my levels of energy were getting better I told them that they could put the pressure on a bit. I would never complain about too much therapy, that's for sure, and they all knew how determined I am. At the Centre, I had physio, hydro, phys.ed. yoga, arm exercises, speech. Again, everybody was wonderful. I am so grateful to Australia. I think we have a pretty good system and I will never complain about paying taxes again.

A couple of weeks after discharge from the rehab centre, I received my discharge letter. I read it, and became very depressed as a result.

I guess it was more stating what I was like when I got to the centre than when I left it, and that was a shock. The word that came again and again was "impulsive." Just as well there was one sentence that made me think that maybe they did get a faint idea of who Monica is. They said that I am a caring person genuinely interested in the welfare of people around me, or something like that. I was a little bit reassured.

My programme with BIRCH was completed at the beginning of June, after 7 months of hard work. This time, the word that came again and again in the farewell speech was "determination", and they got that right. As I use to say, I **WILL NEVER SURRENDER**. And I won't.

One of the physios at BIRCH, after having a look at my left foot, suggested that surgery might be the way to go. An appointment was made with an orthopaedic surgeon, who agreed to surgery after learning I had had serial casting and Botox injections twice, as well as sessions on the tilt table and stretching at home at least twice a day following the Botox injections. He would probably have refused otherwise.

Because he heard a click in my knee, he referred me to have an MRI (Magnetic Resonance Image), so that, if there was anything wrong with the knee he could fix it at the same time and kill 2 birds with one stone.

We made the appointment for the MRI, filled in all the forms. When they learnt that I had had a brain aneurysm and that it was clipped, they refused to do the MRI until they found out what the clip was made of. It was titanium, which is non magnetic. Once the machine is on, the room becomes extremely magnetic, and, depending on what the clip was made of, it could pull it out, creating another bleed in my brain, some-

thing I need like a bullet between my eyes. We got the green light from the RAH and I had the MRI done. It showed that my knee was fine, so the surgery would only be to lengthen the Achilles tendon.

Thanks to our private hospital cover, we were able to schedule surgery quickly and on February 20th, 2006 I had my Achilles tendon surgically lengthened. The surgeon went through the calf, separated it from the muscles etc., lengthened it and put everything back together. He could have gone through the heel and cut the tendon, but he didn't want to create any damage.

After surgery, I had to be in a cast for 6 weeks. I was not looking forward to that, with my experience of casts at the rehab centre. The cast could bear weight, I was able to walk a bit with it and I was even able to sleep at night, so it was not too bad and those 6 weeks went by very quickly. That's when I scanned all my thousands of slides from my travels; I was attached to the printer by the hip as my husband would say. Soon enough, it was time to remove the cast and have a look at my foot. Surgery was a huge success. As a result, my left foot is now flat, so my balance and walking have improved dramatically, to such an extent that I was able to upgrade to a simple walking stick not long after. I was quite happy to exchange the quad stick for a simple walking stick. Do you know what the only drawback of the latter is?? You can't just let it stand next or behind you. Unlike a quad stick, it doesn't stand. When I am home, I am walking more and more without any aid, so that I can carry things in my right hand. I am getting more confident and quite often I don't know where I left my stick. This would have been unthinkable before.

It was also scary to get to the end of the BIRCH programme, but I have received a lot of support and therapy since that fateful day in April, 2005. Furthermore, by the completion date

of the programme, I had been home for over 7 months already, so it was not as scary as being discharged from the in-patient rehab centre. In those 7 months at home, the sky had not fallen on my head, so I thought I should be ok, it was unlikely to fall on my head now. I also knew I would still get some physio through BIOC, this time with students, as well as some speech therapy, without mentioning all the exercises I do regularly at home.

In order to improve my speech, I was referred to a specialist (dentist) who made a palate lift, for me. This prevents the air from getting out through my nose and therefore makes me less nasal. Because my muscles are still working, although not 100%, I also have exercises to do at home, because we hope that with practice, they will get stronger. If I speak slowly, people usually understand me anyway. That must be another keyword, slow.

Through BIOC (Brain Injury Options Coordination) I am still getting speech therapy with students. I'm already a lot clearer with my speech, but there is always room for improvement, don't you think?

Ever since I was discharged from the rehab centre, in October 2005, I tried to do as much as I can at home. I was always the one to make the beds in the morning (if they are made, the house looks half tidy already). I would do some washing, fold clothes, pack up the kids' mess, and cook dinner regularly. One thing is for sure; I will always give it at least a try or two before asking for help.

Because, through BIOC I get several hours with a support worker every week, I have been able to do quite a bit more. The support worker can help me with things I don't manage to do by myself, like putting double bed sheets on the line or making beds from scratch, or mopping the floor. They can also drive me to various appointments, or to school to collect

the children. It has been very good. The hours of support have been reduced, but I am still getting some and making the best possible use of them. I am going to the gym twice a week and my support worker can help me with some of the equipment, etc. and there are a few exercises I would not be able to do without her help.

So what do I do all day you must wonder? I get up around 7.30, get dressed, go in the kitchen, have breakfast, see the kids off to school (might get a kiss if I'm lucky). While Vince brings them to school, I have a shower. I then clean a bit, pack toys and sweep the floor. I might put a load of washing on if the weather is nice; make the beds, of course. Then, I check my emails and do my exercises. After that, I spend a lot of time on the computer. I am forever working on my writing and changing it. It is hundreds of hours of work. Once a week I have physio with students. In the afternoon, I also usually start to get things ready for dinner if I am the one cooking that night (Vince still does some of the cooking. It depends what is on the menu, we both have our dishes). I have always enjoyed cooking (and if you bear in mind that I could not even boil an egg when I left my mum's place, I have become quite a good cook). Do you know what my best reward is? The kids eating without complaining. That makes it worth all the effort, and they usually do.

12

THOUGHTS

QUITE OFTEN, PEOPLE tell me I look good. Before, I used to say that it didn't matter how I looked, because I am beautiful inside. Now, when people tell me I look good, I reply that inside it is ugly ...

It is love/friendship/affection, and feelings in general (and the memory thereof) that help us through difficult times and that give value to our life. Without feelings, life would not be worth much. So I am very lucky. I have got many memories of those feelings that I can recall to give me strength to keep going.

I think I am and have always been a positive person, and I believe in the power of positive thinking. It is sometimes hard to see the positive side of things, but I guess it could be worse... (It could be my right side that had been affected or I could be dead, or I could have been in the car with the kids when it happened, or it could have happened during the night when Vince was on a business trip, the kids would have found me dead in the morning, or I could be a drooling vegetable). I think I am a strong person, and my friends and family know

that and it has been quite hard sometimes to hear them say: "you are strong. You will make it, we believe in you". It's good that they believe in me but at the same time I feel like telling them "look guys, this is bloody hard"...

It makes me struggle even harder to not disappoint them. Sometimes it would be tempting to just give up, but that would not be me. I am a very perseverant kind of person, a fighter, a survivor, and when I start something I usually bring it to the end.

My motto and advice to anybody in the same situation is: "**NEVER SURRENDER**" and I will never. If I had to give up, I would have done it a long time ago. I have come too far to give up now.

I was told by someone to make my writing funny, I have to say I tried but I find it quite hard to see the funny side of my situation. I remember in the rehab centre, getting ready for the day in the morning, I would joke with the nurses, after being dressed, I needed a splint for my left leg, a sling for my left arm, and sometimes a splint for my left arm/hand as well, so I would then tell them to get my teeth in the glass on the sink, my hearing aid in my top drawer, together with my glass eye, whilst my fake boob was in the wardrobe. Not extremely funny, but at least I tried.

I was also told that if I wanted this to become a best seller, which is not really my objective, I should put sex in it, as sex seems to sell. I replied that I could probably find a few spicy stories, but they are mine only, and of the person I shared them with. I am quite a private person and I would not know how to include them in my writing. But if you read between the lines, you can probably find some with a bit of imagination, and there definitely is romance. A life without romance would be quite sad. Maybe I even managed to make you laugh, or at least smile and hopefully I didn't bore you.

As said earlier, I started writing as a form of therapy, and because one day my children might want to read it. If other people are interested too, so be it.

I always try to find the positive side of things, so I am of course doing it with the present situation as well. All I have been able to come up with is at this stage is all the wonderful people (other brain injury survivors, staff, therapists in the rehab centres, service providers and so on) that I have met through this, that I would otherwise probably never have met, and also the response my situation created, from my friends, family, the community, etc. It has been overwhelming and I am very touched. Very soon after it happened, for instance, all the families at my son's kindergarten cooked for us. The freezer was full, giving Vince a break on the cooking front... Since I am originally from Europe, already 6 people made the 20,000 km trip to come and see me, not bad... 3 good friends and 3 family members.

Another good thing about this is that my mum came not long after it happened and now I know she will come again.

Another positive outlook, I guess, is that it has given me the opportunity to write this, which I would otherwise probably not have been able to do. (I was too busy, never had much time for myself).

Now a few words about my better half, my husband, **Vince**, who had to jump in my shoes from one day to the next without warning. It's very hard to take up somebody else's role like that, especially if it's a role you are not used to. I think he is doing a terrific job.

From one day to the next, Vince had to do all the things I used to do, as well as visit me in the hospital or the rehab centre. He even kept working for a couple of months, which was crazy. I think he had no idea how much I was actually doing, but he sure knows now what the word "mother" means (and

it means a lot). If one day, when everything is back to normal, if he finds me reading in the backyard when he comes home from work he won't say "not a bad life" as he used to, because the house will be clean, the washing and shopping done, dinner underway, the kids bathed, school reading done and so on and he now knows what this means.

I would certainly not be where I am had he not been at my side every little step, and I will be forever grateful. This is of course very hard on our relationship, which has, for various reasons been under a lot of strain ever since we moved to South Australia a few years ago, but this is definitely the hardest. I told him one day that this would either make us very strong as a family or it would destroy us.

What about my children, **Sarah** and **Lucas** that are the ones who give me strength to keep struggling every day, so I can get better, see them grow and be a part of their childhood. We used to be pretty close before this happened, but I don't think our relationship will ever be the same. They can be very hard with me, but not on purpose, of course, that's what children are like.

This must have affected them too. I had been there for them every single day of their life since they were born, and then, suddenly, this.

Sometimes they ignore me, or don't want to give me a kiss or a hug and that hurts me, I am still here after all, even if different.

Sometimes, when they are a bit mean, I tell them "hello, I'm here, remember me? I am your mother"... Before this happened, I had some kind of control, and now, years of work with them out of the window. It doesn't seem fair. As I tell my daughter all the time, my heart is fine and I have feelings. I think the message is getting through.

The rest of my family, of course, especially my big brother

Luca, because we were so close growing up and always stayed very close—he was always there for me. He passed away in April 2006, and although I thought I had cried all the tears of my body in those first few months in the rehab centre, I discovered that I still had plenty, a river, a sea, an ocean of tears. No drought there...

It is sad to lose a brother, and I could not have wished for a better one, always looking after his little sister. I am grateful that he went quickly and did not suffer. He had cancer. I am also very grateful that **Catherine** his partner for 17 years was with him until his last breath and he left in peace.

As I told her, she was, during this ordeal, my rock, because she was with him, not allowed to cry to not upset him.

I would not have been able to do that. By now you have all understood that I am a bit of a fountain...

Luca died on April 8, 2006. In less than a year, my mum almost lost her daughter and lost her son.

When I talked to Catherine after he passed away, I had a favour to ask. I could not make it to Switzerland for the funeral for obvious reasons. Luca wanted to be cremated, so I asked her to keep his ashes until I got there in July, so that we could go and put them somewhere together. I also asked her to put a rose on the lid of the coffin for me.

Someone told me some time ago that we all have cancer inside, but that something needs to trigger it. I could not help wondering if what happened to me triggered my brother's.

Catherine told me that when the aneurysm ruptured, he did not leave the flat for 5 days so that he would not miss a phone call with news. In 5 days she said Luca slept about 2 hours. Only when he knew I was not in the coma anymore did he dare go out. As I have said many times already, Luca and I were very close.

What happened to me certainly didn't help, but, Catherine

said, it was more a conjunction of different things.

Friendship. Is very important to me. I have dear friends a bit everywhere. I have many good memories with many friends, many of whom we have been friends for over 20 years and we know each other so well that sometimes words are not necessary to understand each other. Some friendships went through rough times, as we were growing up and turning into adults, through different experiences, but they have survived and are still strong. I'd like to thank all my friends for existing. I love them all deeply and life would not be the same without them.

A very good friend of mine for over 20 years already is **Eva**. We met when we started our apprenticeship together and became very close over the following 3 years. Together, we went to Madrid in Spain for 2 weeks holiday one Christmas (she is Spanish). We would see each other every day at work, talk on the phone, have lunch together and even write notes to each other (emails didn't exist back then, we'd use the company's internal mail), and we would also spend a fair amount of time together outside of work. She is someone very special, and when my first child was born, although we never christened her, I asked Eva to be the godmother, and she is.

Although we live very far away from each other, we are still very close, maybe even becoming closer as the years go by. That's probably why she was so quick to react and come here when she learnt what happened. She is someone I know I can rely on for almost anything, someone I would trust my life with, someone who would bail me out of jail if needed. When we go to Switzerland for a holiday. I always make sure we see each other at least a few times. On our trip in 2004, both she and her husband Patric took a day off, so that we could go together to a place up the mountains and spend

the day there together. We saw each other quite a few times. Eva and her husband also looked after the children for a day when I went for a bike ride with Fabrice. Eva drove us to the airport when we left. Eva, Patric and their and their children are a wonderful family and it's always good to spend time with them

There are many more friends, but the list would not be exhaustive anyway, so I'd better stop now. Whether they are mentioned here or not, I love all my friends a lot and their friendship is important to me. I guess **Eva** and **Francine** are mentioned by their name, because they are the ones I have been friends with for the longest time, over 20 years. But some of the friends I made in recent years are just as important to me, even if, of course, we don't have the same history. There are people you just click with when you meet them, and you then know that a strong and lasting friendship is being born.

I was told many years ago that my signature showed that I would do silly things for love during my whole life—I guess I have done a few, but, not too many, and it doesn't matter because most things I would probably do again. If I could go back and relive my life, there is only one thing I would change. When I had those awful headaches, I would rush to the hospital and tell them something is very wrong with me. Would they do a CAT scan? Would it have been possible to avoid rupture?? I can't help but wonder.

I have been in love many times over the years. Until I got married and settled down with one person, I nevertheless loved deeply all the partners I had over the years, be it a 5 year relationship or just a few months. It didn't work? Maybe it was not supposed to, who knows?

Who said that it's only when you lose something that you realise what you had? This is so true... I realise now that my

normal, busy life was actually very good. We were happy.

Brain injuries are so common, it is scary. Many people don't survive, depending on how long it takes to get medical attention.

If I didn't die back in April 2005, it must be because I haven't finished my mission in this life. I just wish I knew what it is, apart from the obvious one of bringing up my children, (Is there another one?). I know that I want to get better, to resume my life and assume my normal roles again, but I also want to help other people going through the same kind of experience, although I don't know exactly how yet.

Once I am where I want to be, I want to be a volunteer in the rehab centres as well, or I can talk about my experience to give hope and inspiration. If I make it to where I want to be, and I will, anybody motivated and prepared to struggle for it and to not give up hope and faith and never surrender should have a good chance to get there too. I might also prepare some kind of presentation about my round the world trip, with the thousands pictures/slides I have, and show it to patients in the rehab centre, especially the ones with in-patients, because they have a lot of time and it can become boring or depressing. I know, I have been there...I remember at the beginning of my stay, before I was allowed to go home, even for a few hours during the weekend. It was deadly.

There is nothing at all happening, no therapy, of course, nothing at all. The only events breaking the day are the meals, and, not much to look forward to there, more steamed pumpkin maybe?? I showed some slides one evening at the centre and the patients who were there enjoyed it, but then my slide projector broke and that was it. Once I am where I want to be, I will know how to help, but I suspect that somehow it will be brain injury related, because having experienced it myself, I can understand what other people are

going through.

(Even if you really try to imagine what it is like, you can't—the only way to understand is to have experienced it yourself, something I would not wish on my worst enemy).

13

LONG ROAD TO RECOVERY,

1 YEAR DOWN THE TRACK

I HAVE NOW been home for a year. I guess we have some kind of routine again. The kids seem to have settled down a lot and according to the psychologist are a lot calmer, which means we are not doing such a bad job after all.

I enjoy writing and spend a lot of time doing it. Every time I open the document, something changes.

As a little girl, one of my dreams was to become a writer. This book might not be a masterpiece, but I have to write about something I know, so it's about my life. It doesn't matter if nobody else ever reads it; I am writing it for myself, to show to myself that I am still alive and capable of doing something creative. If it helps me come to terms with what has happened, then it is worth it. Don't you think? My children might also want to read it one day and then may understand better what the brain injury was, and still is, like for me.

I still sometimes wonder if I will ever make it, but I have decided not to ever doubt that, because I know I don't want to spend the rest of my life like I am now. I am young, I still have

many years ahead and I want to be able to enjoy them fully. I know I can only do my best, and I am doing it. I nevertheless still want to believe that I will make it.

Even when your formal rehabilitation seems to get to an end, do not despair. There are many exercises you can do at home by yourself and anything you do or try to do is some sort of therapy. We will never stop improving.

Of course, I get frustrated with my limitations, but I find different ways of doing things, and adapt to the situation. It is frustrating, yes, but it could be worse. I could be a drooling vegetable.

It is now almost 18 months since the aneurysm ruptured and I have been home for a year. How am I doing? Considering I almost died, I am doing pretty well, thank you.

I am still far from getting to the finish line, but I keep improving, don't lose faith and hope, am still as motivated as ever and determined to make it.

I sometimes feel discouraged and feel like saying "I don't want to play this game anymore, I don't like it. Let's find another game, like a child or, still like a child, ask, are we there yet? But no, we're not. Never surrender though, hey?"

In April 2006, we had a party / get together for Vince's 50th birthday and the first anniversary of surviving the aneurysm. Not much to celebrate there? On the contrary... what about the improvements I have achieved so far. Many friends who attended saw me shortly after the brain injury, in hospital or in the rehab centre after I was transferred there, so they know where I am coming from, something I can't remember or even imagine, which is why it is sometimes hard for me to realise what a good recovery I am making.

They are all very impressed with my progress. It was lovely to have all these people who love us and care around for a very enjoyable evening. Friends are so important, and

friendship lasts forever.

When I look at the pictures of my recovery, I am always surprised at how sad I look, even the ones of my 40th birthday, only a month before I was discharged from the centre. I look very sad indeed.

My programme with BIRCH was completed early June 2006. It was a bit scary, because my journey is far from being over, but I have received a lot of support so far and I can't complain. I am not complaining, just a bit scared. I was lucky to get in the programme in the first place, because there is more demand than offer.

It is only fair that I leave the spot for someone else to have the same chance/opportunity I had.

The programme towards the end was going more and more towards community and home, to prepare me somehow to life beyond rehab. I have my arm/hand programme, physio exercises that I try to do at least once a day as well as a few speech exercises. It's also good to remember that therapy is wonderful, but again, therapists are only guides, it's the patient that does all the work.

For me, there is also the Adviser, that imaginary person who is always on my left, in the nothing and makes sure I do all the things I am supposed to do (see later).

Before my brain injury, I was so busy with the household, the kids and part time work that I never had time for myself. I have a lot of time now, but because of my disabilities, I am not able to enjoy it the way I would have before. I will keep working on my writing, something I enjoy and I have to bring this project to its end, and this is something I can do.

I used to do a lot of beading before. It started when I came back from Switzerland in 2004 with a crystal ring a friend had made for me over there. Everybody here was admiring it a lot, so I decided to learn how to make them. I found the pat-

tern on the internet, bought just enough beads to make one, and tried. It took me 2 ½ hours, but I managed. I bought more beads and started to sell them, without really planning to do it. From rings, I extended to bracelets, earrings, anklets, necklaces and so on. I was selling them at craft markets, or just making them for my friends. I then started to do parties. This way, people could either buy something already made or choose a model and the colours and I would custom make it. I was starting to build a nice little business and really enjoyed doing it.

When I had the aneurysm I had to stop, of course. I had a lot of time at the centre, so I asked Vince to bring me my beads, but the things I used to make are quite intricate, requiring two hands, so that when I tried, I got very frustrated and didn't get any pleasure out of it. I did a few things with my cousin while she was here, but I can't do the things I used to, so, for now, I have given up. Once my left arm is back, maybe I will start again.

So, after one year of struggling to get my life back under control, how do I feel? I am happy with what I have achieved so far. I have improved a lot. When I look back, I am very upset at the way my brain injury affected not only me, but my family as well, especially my husband and children. In her school report at the end of the year (about 8 months after the aneurysm), my daughter's teacher wrote that she hoped I would have a complete recovery so that Sarah could be happy again. Guess what... yes, it made me cry.

I used to be quite close to the children, being the primary carer, but this is unfortunately in the past. I am not the mum they were used to anymore. I have disabilities, my voice has also changed and they do not relate to me the way they used to. Hopefully one day everything will get back to normal and they will feel close to me again. Maybe they are scared to get

close to me in case something happens to me again? I am working on them. I am forever telling them that I love them. They know that anyway, but I won't make the mistake my mum made with my brother and me. I don't think that you can tell your children that you love them too often.

As a result of the brain injury, I have also lost the peripheral vision on the left for both eyes. I have known that for a long time, I have now seen a specialist, who mapped my eyesight, and it's quite a shock to see it on paper, the right half is normal and the left does not exist. I actually call the left side **the nothing**. If I don't scan, it does not exist. I have told the children that for me to be able to see them if they are on my left, they need to see my eyes, otherwise, I can't see them.

If my sight does not improve, I will never be able to drive again. That would be a real pain. I was so used to jumping in the car and go wherever I wanted to whenever I wanted to. A car is such a symbol of independence. I was not too worried about the sight early on, I had too many other things to worry about, but I have to admit that it is quite annoying. I was told that blind people see black. I don't, it just doesn't exist. If it was black, it would not be a problem to scan all the time; the black would be a reminder. I think there is nothing wrong with my eyes; again, it is my brain that does not receive and register the messages sent by my eyes.

It could come back, or not, who knows. I will have a follow-up visit in a few months to see if there is any improvement. Touch wood...As a result all my spatial awareness is distorted, that can be tricky too. When I am somewhere, I am not too worried about my walking anymore, but about the nothing on the left. If someone comes on my left quickly, I don't see anything.

So, how did the brain injury change my life? Well I guess it shattered it. I had a normal, happy, busy life—I was extremely

independent, organised, healthy and active, always doing something. So I am obviously not the same person anymore. All the independence is gone.

To be able to get on with life, you have to acknowledge the losses first. Then, since I am doing my best to recover and can't do anymore than that, I have to accept them, (pretty hard to do), and, get on with life. Yes, life goes on. Different from what we were used to, but I have to make the most out of it.

You can never take anything for granted, because it can change in the blink of an eye (as it did for me).

It's only when you try to do something that you realise that you can't.

You make progress just to realise how far you still have to go.

It's funny, when I was in the rehab centre; I thought the amount of speech therapy I was receiving was surprising. I never really understood how much my speech had suffered, with my voice being softer and my speech blurry and I was more interested in physiotherapy, because I was very aware of the new limitations of my body.

Well, I guess my speech therapists have done a good job, because people always congratulate me on how much clearer my speech is. Because my injury was on the right side of the brain (which is why the left side of my body is affected), the language and thought were not touched, or very little. I can still speak 4 languages fluently (slowly if I want to be understood...), my memory is good, and my problem with speech is mainly speed and clarity, I don't mix up words and use the wrong words when talking and so on, which happens quite frequently with brain injuries. And, I have been able to write this, not a bad achievement I guess.

With 2 therapists, my speech therapist and the Neuro psychologist, we have come up with an idea to help me where needed. All the tests we did show that I am a very verbal

person, so we will try to use this strength to work on some weaknesses.

We have therefore created **The Adviser**, who is here to help me with PSS i.e. posture, speech and scanning. Each category has sub-categories and he is there to make sure I pay attention to all the things I am supposed to. Posture means straight and “in-line” not all out of whack, speech means make sure that I speak slowly, over articulate, think smile and wave for my voice, and also scan to check what people are doing before I start talking, so that I can get their attention and one more thing, tuck my chin in. That’s a lot to think about every time I want to say something.

Scanning is, of course to try to be more aware of the nothing, and always scan left; turning my head to make sure I can see everything on the left, so that hopefully, all these things will become more automatic.

For someone who now finds it hard to multitask, that makes many things to think about all the time. I have actually told my speech therapist that I might just decide to shut up instead, but she doesn’t want me to do that... By imagining the Adviser on my left side all the time observing me, it should help me to do all these things all the time; otherwise the Adviser will hit me with a stick...

So the progress made in one year is worth celebrating, but the journey is not over, and I am still travelling on my long road to recovery.

I will get there... it’s just a matter of time. One year in a brain injury as serious as mine is a very short time. The brain heals, but slowly, and it can learn again, but it is a slow process.

The 2 keywords in this experience must be slow and patience, but there are many more that are as important: courage, faith, hope, determination and never surrender. As I said before, I won’t and I will get there.

14

THINGS KIDS SAY OR DO

ONCE WHEN I was telling him off for whatever reason, my son said: "You are not the boss mum". You were the boss when you had long hair (his way to say before this happened) but you are not the boss anymore. When you have long hair again"...

Or

"You're not the boss mum, you're sick."

Another night, he had a glimpse at my blue sport's bra so asked me what that blue thing was, I explained, and then he said: "does it help you not die?"

And, another time, when one of the therapists was at our place. She saw a collage about our family, with pictures of all of us, that I had made for Lucas when he started Kindy. She asked what it was and Lucas answered: that's when mummy was happy and daddy wasn't mean...

And what about that night after the bedtime story when I wanted to tuck him under. He wanted his dad, although I insisted and he said: "daddy does it. He didn't have the aneurysm"

And that other night when Sarah was quite mean with me

and I ended up in tears? I went to my son's room to say good-night. I had tears rolling down my cheeks. He got quite distraught to see me like that, so he gave me a big hug, patted me on the back, wiped my tears with a tissue, brought me more tissues so I could blow my nose and calm down. And then went to his sister's room and told her off: "you're mean, you made mummy cry, you're mean".

And that evening in the car on our way home. I asked the kids to tell me what was good about me not dying. Lucas straight away replied "because we love you". When I tucked him in his bed that night, I told him that what he said touched me. He looked at me in the eyes, and then asked "was it the right answer mummy?" I explained that there was no right answer but that that was something sweet to say. My way back to my kids' heart is through their tummy.

I could probably find a few other strange things they said. I know that if they hurt me and quite often they did, I decided straight away it was something I didn't need to remember and they're gone.

Sarah also told me one day: "you know mummy, when you had the aneurysm it was the first and only time we were all separated. Dad was in Melbourne, you were in the ambulance, I was at school with Allan and Lucas was in childcare.

I almost have to beg to get a kiss or a hug and that's hard. I need that touching, I am a touchy kind of person (I am European after all). When my son goes to bed, if Vince is reading the story, I go in his room for a while, sit on his bed and scratch his back while he listens. He loves that. Or I just hold his little hand in mine. Through that touch, I am giving him all the love I feel. He might not understand that, but it helps me.

15

BACK TO SWITZERLAND FOR A HOLIDAY

IN JULY 2006, 15 months after the rupture of the aneurysm, I had recovered enough for us to decide to go to Switzerland on a holiday.

I had been told by various therapists that patients usually have a break between the in-patient rehab centre and the Community/Home Programme. When I was discharged from the rehab centre though, all I could think of and wanted was more therapy, more rehab and I therefore never had that break (I didn't want to miss any therapy). Knowing that my programme would not last forever and would be completed early June, we planned and made bookings to go to Switzerland. I had been working very hard since April the previous year and surely deserved a holiday. I also wanted to see my family and friends, and I had to farewell my beloved brother properly, without forgetting I needed to meet the latest addition to the family (my cousin's baby daughter), many reasons indeed to do the trip. A few people were a bit concerned about such a long trip, but we had told the neurosurgeon about us planning to do it, and he saw no reason for us not to.

We left Australia at the end of June for a 6 week stay in Europe, mainly Switzerland, but also France, (Paris and Collonges near Geneva) as well as Milan in Italy, to meet my cousin Elisa's baby daughter, Alice, born only a bit over a month earlier. We went from Adelaide to Darwin, Singapore, then Paris, Where we were in transit for 3 days. And then on to Geneva. We had organised assistance in the airports where we were in transit, because walking long distances is not the best for me, so we had a wheelchair available everywhere. Since it was there, we used it, but we could have done without. Because I had used mine very little or not at all at home since surgery on my leg, we didn't bring it (and never needed it while abroad).

In Paris we were able to catch up with some friends (which is why we stopped there). At the airport in Geneva, we were treated to a welcome committee of about 10 people (friends and family members) with big cow bells (the same ones my friends used when they saw me off to Australia 9 years before). A few tissues were needed. Some people who made the trip to Australia last year were there, my mum, Eva and Anne. I had to show off a bit so walked the last part, (after customs, as we were getting to where people welcoming travellers wait), without the aid of my walking stick. Eva and my mum had seen me in very bad shape the previous year, so they were quickly able to realise the long road I had covered since. I cried for my brother's death with Catherine. I think we both needed to cry together. Soon enough, we were on our way to the beautiful Swiss Riviera, which is where I was born ... We went to Montreux to my friend Anne's apartment, that she was letting us use for the duration of our stay, herself moving in with a friend. How thoughtful.

There, more friends came over to welcome us and we ordered pizza for dinner. It was wonderful to be surrounded by

my friends. I had been told beforehand that some of them were scared to see me again. I could not understand that, after all, it is still me. The thing is, they had no idea what to expect after brain injury. That's one of the very positive outcomes of the trip. All my friends are now completely reassured that the Monica they know is definitely still there, her personality and way of being have not changed. She is as mad as ever.

One of the first things I wanted to do was, with Catherine, to organise our farewell to Luca. She had asked me if I wanted it to be just her and me or if close friends of his could come too. Knowing my brother I said that his friends were welcome to join us, of course. Since we were going to a remote and hard to find spot on a river, we first met somewhere and then followed each other. We went to one of my brother's favourite fishing spots. He had had a passion for fly fishing for many years, made his own flies, started a shop specialised in that with a friend and also gave fly-fishing lessons. Fishing was definitely part of his life. The fishing part of it was what he enjoyed and more than often he would put the fish he had just caught back in the river.

One regret I now have is that we never went fishing together. I guess living at the other side of the world didn't help in that respect. We had talked about going with the kids when we were there on a holiday. They were still a bit young though, and it involved a fair bit of walking on the bank of the river, so it never happened. We always thought we had time to do it on another trip. We went fishing together when we were kids. I was disgusted by the worms, so he would always put them on the hook for me.

We arrived at the lovely spot Catherine had chosen. There was quite a crowd of friends and I did a fair bit more crying. The spot was so beautiful; I thought she could not have found a better place for him. There was a bridge across the river.

Dropping the ashes from the bridge would have been the easiest, but I didn't want that. I didn't want them to be blown by the wind. I wanted us to put them straight in the water. We found a spot where there was like a fountain and current, and I knew that was the place. The access was not really easy for me, but two friends carried me and I sat by the river. We put his ashes in the water, cried a bit more, and saw him float away. Just after, like something in his honour, we saw many trout jump out of the water. I know that now he is at peace and he will live forever in our hearts.

After the ashes' "ceremony", we had a barbecue all together and this is exactly what he would have wanted. This done, Catherine could then try to turn the page and get on with life. We had to farewell him together first.

Not long after, we went to Milan for a couple of days. Because it is a big city, very hot in summer, and not too exciting for children, Eva offered to look after the kids for 2 days. That was very good because we were able to relax a bit more and they had a lot more fun with her and her family than they would have had in Milan with us. I had two reasons to go to Italy; one was to see my nonna, and the rest of my family there. My nonna is not getting younger and she actually told me that it was probably the last time we would see each other. She has always been a bit melodramatic. Her health is not perfect, but not too bad either and I sure hope we will see each other again.

The other reason was to see Elisa and meet her daughter Alice. I had been so happy for her ever since I had learned that she was pregnant not long after leaving Australia. I remember that in one email, she wrote that that baby was very brave to choose a family where there was so much crying. Elisa and her husband had been trying to have a baby for a while. It's so good it happened. I told her when I learnt that

something good had to come out of such a shit year. She is going to be such a wonderful mother. When Sarah, my first child was born, Elisa made the trip from Italy to be with me and be the representative of my family. It was unthinkable for me not to go and see her. I would have enjoyed very much being close to her during her pregnancy. Having been through that experience twice, I could have reassured her when she needed to be or just be there for her. She knows I was by her side anyway.

When I saw her, her daughter Alice was just one month old. She was crying a lot and poor Elisa didn't know what to do. The baby would cry so much she would turn purple and I could see Elisa sweating, very upset at not knowing what to do. She would look at her daughter and say, again and again, "breathe". I think Alice had colic and there is not much you can do about it. I suggested that she give her some water to drink, as she might not always be hungry, but thirsty because it was very hot. I also told her that breastfeeding takes 6 weeks to implement so she should not to panic, as everything would be fine. Alice was putting on weight normally although at the beginning she was not sucking properly. I also suggested not giving up breastfeeding too quickly, but that if it didn't work and bottle feeding did, then just go for what worked.

We are in contact regularly and I know that everything settled down. Alice now only cries when she is hungry and Elisa knows what to do. It can be very distressing to have a crying baby and be unable to make him/her stop. Alice is growing nicely and Elisa is a lot more relaxed

In the 6 weeks we stayed in Switzerland, we didn't have one day under 30 degrees, pretty hot indeed. We therefore went regularly to the lake. Unlike previous trips, I was unable to just jump in the water and play with the kids, but I nevertheless managed to go for a few dips.

We also enjoyed friends' pools. We went out almost every night at friends' places. The few times we were at the apartment, we had friends coming over for a coffee or a meal or to cook dinner for us. I spent many hours on the terrace talking. After all, catching up with everybody was one of the reasons to go there. It was wonderful for my spirit to see all my friends again, to find the landscapes (lake and mountains) of my childhood, to get back to my roots.

We saw my mum almost every day as we usually had lunch with her. She was very happy to see my progress. She has had a tough time, almost losing her daughter and losing her son in less than a year.

My mum is not very good at showing her emotions and she didn't cry. I told her she should and that we could cry together if she wanted, I am good at that.

Well, life goes on I guess and as I keep telling her, at least I can only get better, and she witnessed how determined I still am.

The time went quickly and it was soon time to get ready to come back home. It was sad to say goodbye to everybody, but we will go again and the links between us are unbreakable. I was ready to come home, full of new energy to keep going on my long road. Everybody is reassured; Monica is not just a shadow of the woman she used to be. That woman is still very much there.

Spending that time with my family and friends was wonderful. It recharged my batteries, and reassured everybody. We will go again, of course, in a couple of years or so. I was even able to catch up with some friends I had not seen for many years. I can't think of anyone I would have wanted to see that I did not manage to see, that was wonderful, as was seeing my closer friends more regularly.

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THE ROAD CONTINUES

IT WAS GOOD to get home, back in our bed, in our kitchen and especially in our bathroom where I can have a shower whenever I want to without any help from anybody. That was not possible overseas. I needed help to get in and out of the bathtub (most showers there are part of the bath).

The kids were happy to come back too and to find their mates again. We were happy to send them back to school and they were happy to go back. They were very popular the first day they went back; because they brought chocolates for their friends (you can't go to Switzerland and not bring back chocolate, can you)?

The kids enjoyed their holiday, but they also missed their friends. Some of my friends have kids of similar ages, but not all of them, so they didn't always have other kids to play with.

I have walked to the kids' school a few times (1 km). I manage easily, although it takes me about 45 minutes.

I have also walked to a few friends' places. It just takes me some time to get there, but hey, at least I can walk, and I enjoy it. Practice makes perfect they say.

Because I had almost not used the wheelchair in over 6

months, we decided to return it, not wanting to have it sitting around when someone who needed it could be using it.

As we keep telling each other, I can only get better. This is definitely a one way road, forward only. I got the wheelchair through ILEP (Independent Living Equipment Programme), following recommendation from the rehab centre, since I was still a high risk of falling on discharge. I actually did not have the green light to walk without stand by assistance at the time yet.

Considering falling was such a high risk with me, I have done pretty well. In all those months of rehab and after I only fell 3 times.

The first time when I was home for the weekend when I was an in-patient in the rehab centre, i.e. fairly early on. I got up on the Sunday morning. When I arrived in the family room, I got distracted by the kids and fell, taking the heater and a chair with me. Luckily, I was wearing my skull cap (didn't have my bone back yet) and never hit my head anyway. I didn't hurt myself either, but both Vince and I got a bit of a scare.

The second time I was getting out of Vince's car one day. I had done it hundreds of times before without problem, so I am not sure what happened that day. I think my foot was not on the ground properly. I tried to call Vince, but by the time he came around to my side of the car, it was too late and I had fallen on my left side. Again, nothing too serious, but a beautiful bruise on my thigh.

The 3rd and last time was one night when we got home. The sensor light on the porch turned itself off, and I was surprised by the dark and fell on my knees on the step. Very lucky, considering I was such a high risk.

I have now had a new angiogram. The CT scan I had a few months ago was clear, but because the angiogram done in April 2005 showed a small aneurysm on the left, the neurosur-

geon decided to do another one, to be completely sure. There is always a risk with any procedure and I was a bit scared. Nothing went wrong and there are 2 good news: 1) no aneurysm there and 2) I have a brain (and I can prove it, I have images of it, or at least I am in the process of getting them). Hearing from the neurosurgery registrar's mouth that all looks normal in my brain was a big relief indeed. I am very happy to know that I do not have a bomb ticking in my brain.

I am now also being weaned off the anti-seizure tablets. After all, as I said all those months ago, I am not epileptic.

I am still travelling on my road. I now have physio once a week with students. I go to the gym twice a week and do my exercises at home, as well as ½ hour on the bike if possible daily.

Therapy is wonderful, but again, therapists are only guides. It's the patient that does all the work.

Furthermore, anything I do, anything is therapy. I will get there. It might take some time still, but I will. My advice to anybody in this situation is to **never surrender** progress doesn't end, you keep improving all the time. If what I have been writing can be an inspiration to anybody who finds him/herself in the same situation, then it is worth it. Keep hope and faith in your heart. This "book" has kept me busy for a year and a half, and not just any year, but the toughest and longest year of my life. If it can help anybody else, then that's great. As I have already said to many people and will keep saying, if what happened to me can help anybody else in the same situation, then I am happy to do whatever I can.

That's it, I think this has come to an end, but I can't write THE END, because I am still alive and my journey is not over.

instead, I will therefore write **TO BE CONTINUED.**

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

THERE ARE SO many people I want to thank. Where do I start? **FIRST** I want to thank my husband, for being by my side, every step of my long road. Without him caring for me the way he has, I would not have been able to concentrate on my rehab the way I was thanks to his help and support, and I would not be where I am now.

I want to thank my mum, auntie and cousin, as well as Eva and Anne who all made the trip from Europe when they learnt the awful news to be by my side and help in whatever way they could. A special thanks goes to Elisa, who stayed for 6 weeks and spent the whole day every day at the centre with me, making me laugh, and cry, reminisce about our childhood and who was there for me every single minute of her stay down under. I also want to thank all my family and friends overseas and here who, without being close in flesh, were with me every step of my long road, calling, writing or just thinking about me. They mean the world to me, as we say: "friendship never ends" and the support from my friends a bit everywhere in the world has been, and still is a very good psychological support. Thank you all for keeping in touch by emails, phone

calls, sms, letters. And for doing so not only in the first days, but week after week after week, and then month after month after month. It's good to know that despite the distance and time passing by; I am still in your heart and your thoughts. Sorry, but there is no quick recovery from brain injury, and I am still improving every day, and, mark my words, **I WILL GET THERE**.

Thank you too, of course, to all the therapists and other staff in the in-patient rehab centre, and in BIRCH, and to all the people who have been somehow involved in my rehab, support workers, students and so on. You have all been a wonderful support for me. I won't forget the road we have travelled together.

Thank you to the people, especially one person who gave me advice, mainly ideas on how to structure and write this. That's a special person and if anything happens with my writing, this person will be the first to get a signed copy... Thank you, again, to my cousin Elisa who was the first one at a very early stage of my writing, to do the corrections I had handwritten on my draft on my main document on the computer. Her help was much appreciated and, as she knows, she is more like a sister than a cousin to me. Another thank you for Vince, who did the proof-reading of my manuscript.

I also want to thank my country of adoption, Australia, for a health system very well organised indeed. Thank you.

Appendix A

My recovery day by day as seen

by husband

(Extracted from the website he created to keep people all
over the world updated on my progress)

<http://camoni.bigpondhosting.com/default.htm>

MONICA'S RECOVERY

April 13th will be a day to remember for all the wrong reasons as Monica suffered a brain aneurism and collapsed whilst picking up Sarah from school—lucky she was not in the car with the kids or home alone. Monica's friend's at the school reacted very quickly and Monica was in an ambulance very quickly and in the emergency section of the Royal Adelaide Hospital—within an hour she was being operated on to stop the bleeding caused by the aneurism, the Neurosurgeon told me if another hour had passed before they did anything Monica would not have survived. As I was in Melbourne on a business trip I could not help with the kids—when I got a call from Sarah's school telling me that Monica had collapsed (about 3:30pm) I had no idea how bad she was and immediately I rang Alan Hickey (father of Declan who is in Sarah's class) and asked him to pick up Sarah from school and Lucas from childcare. Whilst traveling back to Melbourne Airport to get a flight home I was in contact with a trauma doctor in the hospital and up until I got on board the flight the Neurosurgeon and Anesthetist had spoken to me—it was then that I understood how serious a condition Monica was in and whilst I was flying back she was being operated on—you can imagine what sort of flight I had. In the meantime I had rung my brother-in-law who got through to my sister Candy who then went to the hospital—it was important that family was there for Monica, and Candy actually by chance saw Monica being taken to surgery—I guess an image Candy will remember for a long time.

Alan picked me up from the airport and we went to the waiting room in intensive care where more members of my family had arrived to wait for news on Monica's condition (around 8pm)—it wasn't until 9:30pm that we learned that the opera-

tion was successful and Monica would be taken into intensive care—the doctor told me Monica had a very big aneurysm but they removed it and they fixed something else they found whilst there.

We got to see Monica around 11pm and she didn't look all that flash with all those tubes in her nose, mouth but she was in a stable condition and we were confident she was going to survive.

Day 2 (April 14)–

We went to see her next morning at around 11am and by then it had been some 3 hours since they had stopped giving her sedatives—and she began to move her right arm and right leg—there was a little bit of movement on her left side but it would not be for long as this was the side that was going to be affected since she had the operation on her right hand side of her brain (they removed a piece of skull to get access to the aneurism and this won't be put back for some months)—there is a cross-over affect with head injuries/ops.

The facilities at the RAH intensive care are fantastic with 24 hr nursing (3 shifts)—1 nurse per patient—Monica was probably fortunate to have had this happen in Adelaide and so close to the hospital since the response/turn around time was very quick. The Neurosurgeon told us the aneurism was on the side of the brain that can re-learn—a very positive thing for Monica.

Day 4—Monica was able to squeeze people's hands on command and also let go on command, she also tries to remove the nasal tube so the nurses had to strap her hand to the bed.

Day 5—visited Monica with Candy—Monica's left eye had been opening a little with help.....the nurse kept it open and we asked her if she could see us and she gave us a wave..... a very significant step forward

Day 8—the hospital rang asking for permission to do an angiogram which would show whether the operation was successful—there is a risk of further strokes with this type of procedure but the benefits outweigh the risks—anyway the result showed the aneurism had been successfully treated. But there are another 2 very small ones present but will not require treatment at this stage and may not pose any threat to Monica in the future, but need to be monitored.

Day 12—it was time for Sarah and Lucas to see their Mum... and Monica opened both her eyes and looked at them (we had arranged for the nurse to put a scarf around her head so the kids couldn't see the scar and all those staples—65 of them. Sarah and Lucas were pleased to see their Mum and that she was making a recovery. Half of the staples in Monica's scalp were removed.

Day 13—Monica was moved to R5 Neuro-ward (sharing with 5 other ladies)—and out of intensive care

Day 15—on the way back from spending 2 days at Candy's shack I took Sarah and Lucas for a flying visit to see Monica—Sarah was a bit daunted by it all and I think it is because Monica doesn't look like the Mum she was used to seeing—even though Monica's eyes are no longer puffed up, and Sarah didn't want to stay too long. I didn't have time to arrange for the scarf so they saw the scar—not a big deal for them as it turned out.

Day 16—My Mum and eldest sister (Rita) were there when I visited Monica—I asked Monica if she knew who my Mum was and she said "Mum", Andrea (Alan's wife) came later and she said bonjour to Monica and Monica replied "bonjour".....she has also said "good" and "drink".....albeit very softly since she has a dry mouth due to still being fed by gastric nasal tube.

Day 17—Monica was very active with both eyes open but

looked frustrated again as she must be feeling uncomfortable and not having anything to do must also be bored—I keep asking myself what she could be thinking about—we have told her what happened and she probably remembers some of it—I hope she is not depressed as that is counter-productive. The speech therapist will be seeing her this Monday to evaluate if she can start having fluids the normal way—the protocol is very strict to ensure the patient doesn't choke or have food/drink going into their lungs. Today they had removed the remaining staples from her scalp and the scar is healing very nicely.

Day 18—not much joy here as Monica was sleeping when I visited her

Day 19—what a difference a day makes, Monica was very much awake when I arrived to see her (she is able to keep her right eye fully open now) and Marinette and her 2 daughters Alexia & Natalie were there along with Lucas whom they were looking after. Marinette asked Monica if she knew who the kids were. And she said..."Alexia", "Natalie"...and "Lucas"...and then Marinette asked her something in French and she repeated it. Albeit all very softly....Monica was definitely in good spirits and very relaxed and was not concerned about her being depressed anymore. Lucas didn't want to hold Monica's hand but he eventually did. It was nice to see Mother and child bonding again after a separation....Lucas has been expressing his sadness in this matter by being very clingy to me everyday.

Monica is now in R5 Ward (North Wing) B end

Day 20—Monica was asleep when I saw her today but awake when my brother-in-law (Marty) went later in the afternoon....Marty said Monica was wide awake and rather sad as she was crying. probably as she now understands fully her predicament (if I was in her position I would be a wreck with

worry—just as well Monica is very positive about life generally). I decided to take the kids into see Monica after dinner (after speaking to Candy who suggested it would be good for Monica and the kids)—Monica was not in the ward and had been taken to have an X-Ray since she had pulled out her nasal tube.....a nurse in the ward took us down to where Monica was waiting to have her X-ray—she was in reasonable spirits and perked up when she saw Sarah and Lucas and held their hands—it was definitely a worthwhile visit for all of us as I was a bit depressed after hearing about her crying, and Sarah and Lucas were happy to see her.

Day 21—today they started giving Monica some liquid food. I took the kids to see her around 4pm and she was able to see them and hold their hands.

Day 22—I turned up to find Monica with no nasal tube and her hand free...it sounded too good to be true as the nurse told me Monica had pulled out her tube again and they will have to replace it...I explained (again) to Monica that it was important to have the tube in place. She said "it hurts"then later when I was talking to her she said "what happened". Which is interesting as I thought she remembered the whole event... obviously not. A crazy idea came to me whilst visiting her in that she may want to hear a friendly voice from Switzerland.... so I asked if she wanted to hear her brother (Luca) ...she half indicated yes so I rang Luca on my mobile and told him to talk to her...and I put the earpiece in Monica's ear...I don't know what Luca said but Monica cried...and when I talked to Luca afterwards he cried also.....pretty hard not to in this situation. Monica is improving in holding down liquid food.

Overall Monica was in reasonable spirits and since she looks a bit bored I asked if she would like to watch TV. She said yes....but I have to ring up to arrange it to be switched on.

Day 23—Wow....I took the kids to see Monica and she was

very much awake and talkative....she said " I'm dying for a smoke", "where are my clothes", I " I need to go to the loo"... Unfortunately she had removed her nasal tube many times over the last day or so and her arm was tied down again... I told her to listen to the nurses and not pull out the tube but she said " I didn't do it". She must be forgetting things....anyway Sarah got to hug her Mum....Lucas wouldn't though... he's at that age where he can't understand what's going on. I read out a note sent by Luca written by her Mum...Monica cried whilst I read it to her.....understandably as her Mum told her she loved her and would be coming to see her soon.

Day 25—Mother's Day: Eva (one of Monica's best friends from Switzerland) arrived today and will stay for 2 weeks—we took her to see Monica....Monica was in an armchair watching TV and very with it. She cried when she saw Eva.....Sarah gave her Mum lots of hugs and kisses but Lucas could only hug her. He says "I'll kiss her when she's better"kids say the earnest things. Monica still asks for her bag and wants to go to the toilet. She remembers people but not necessarily what happened to her. She is getting better at eating her food so hopefully soon she will lose the nasal tube. Sarah finally showed signs of her distress at not having Monica around as she cried whilst we were at Candy's place for a Mother's Day dinner with all the family present...I think it was good for Sarah to let her emotions out.

Day 26—Double Wow. another good day for Monica—to-day when I visited her I met with the Brain Injury Rehabilitation Team and they suggested she may be moving to a rehab centre soon (most likely Hampstead Centre—very close to where we live) but this depends on how quickly they remove the nasal tube—and that maybe soon i.e. next week as Monica ate all her lunch today (chicken curry with potatoes and spinach (all mashed up though)—Monica said it was

good but then hospital food!!!!) the Speech Pathologist was there also and tested her eating skills whilst giving her some mashed up fruit...this was before lunch and she said Monica was doing well.

Also 2 physiotherapists helped Monica to sit up on the side of the bed and then they got her to stand almost on 2 feet. Obviously with not much weight on her left leg....this was to get her balance back.

In the evening I took Eva and the kid to see Monica—Monica was a bit drowsy but she perked up when she saw us. And was adamant again about smoking....I met the Neurosurgeon who did the operation and I had a good chat with him about smoking and nicotine patches. basically he said she can't smoke for at least another month or have any patches as the nicotine may induce a seizure...we also talked about the 2 small aneurisms they found in the post op angiogram they did...he says there is a small one on her left side that may be fixed via a catheter (a small tube inserted through her groin into the blood vessel going to the brain)—the other one is on her right side and may be fixed before they put the piece of skull back (usually after 2 to 6 months), or they could wait and see how things go. The Neurosurgeon also said that Monica will walk again (as the leg movements come back easier than complicated hand movements) but may have some weakness in her left hand.

Day 27—Another good day as I received a call from the Brain Injury Rehab Team telling me that Monica has qualified to go to Hampstead Centre next week (Tues)—I will have a look at the facilities today. I took Eva and the kids after school and found Monica a bit sleepy but she perked up when she saw us. Her dinner was there on the tray but when I told about it she wasn't really interested....but not long after she asked for it and I got to feed her. And she ate it all up. The nurse came

to do a few tests and asked her if she remembered her birthday....she did. Monica asked to go to the toilet so they got her into a wheelchair and took her...but she couldn't go apart from passing urine. She told me she had a shower today—it must have been a great feeling for her rather than just being washed with a wet cloth.

Day 28—today I visited Hampstead Rehab Centre and was given a tour of the facilities. it is an extension of the RAH and well set up as a rehab centre...Monica will be going there next Tues (17th May) and will have her own room with TV etc—this is about 1 km from where we live. I took the kids to see Monica and she was sitting up in a chair. she was quite alert but by the time we were ready to leave she was asking to go back to bed....but she managed to write " I love you" to Sarah...and she wrote it in a straight line and easily...it is hard for her to keep her head up after being in bed for so long. She needs to build up her neck muscles which will take time. Monica had many visitors today...Eva and Andrea, Marty, Julia and her boyfriend Matt...And us.

Day 29—Today was another milestone day as they removed the gastric nasal tube from Monica's nose. and she was in good spirits...I took the kids later on and Monica was very happy to see them...esp. Lucas who was a bit freer with his emotions towards Monica. He even kissed her....towards the end of the visit Monica became emotional and cried....causing Sarah to burst into tears. She misses her mum dearly and can't understand why it is taking so long for her recovery. She thought it would take a day or so...if only! Monica wrote" its weird being not well....."I'll be back"whilst Julia and Matt visited her just before the kids and I went to see her.

Day 30—I took the kids after school again to find Monica in good spirits—she was happy to see Sarah and Lucas. Not long after an ophthalmologist came to check on Monica's vi-

sion—it seems she has suffered some loss of peripheral sight which affects her ability to drive a car later on.

Day 31—Monica was trying to read a book whilst in an arm-chair but she seemed to struggle with it and looked very uncomfortable, her balance is not quite right and she still can't sit up straight for too long.

Day 32—Monica was quite good when I visited her with the kids—she asked when the doctors would put back the piece of her skull and when I told her it would take months she couldn't quite understand the timing since she was going to move out of hospital in a few days.....I told her they would bring her back to the hospital to do it...then she asked about the other 2 aneurisms and said she wanted them fixed (she has been reading her progress as I printed a copy from our website)....a good sign.

Day 33—Monica's last night in hospital before moving to Hampstead—she was in good form tonight and was happy to see us....Sarah's teacher (Mrs. Dahms) had been to visit her and although Monica was asleep when she went Mrs. Dahms left a nice note...to which Monica replied and we will ask Mrs. Dahms to read it out to her and Sarah's class—it was to thank the kids for their nice cards they wrote for Monica with all those kind thoughts about her getting better. Monica had made an extensive list of things she wants me to bring to her in Hampstead...she is obviously with it...and also very cold as she asks for a lot of warm things.

I will be giving a mobile to Monica—0428-171298.....or 61-428171298 for those international callers...just be aware that Monica will be able to hear you if she gets to the phone in time but you may not hear her as she still has a soft voice—best time to ring her is after 3:30pm local time (8am Central European time) as she will have therapy etc most mornings and early afternoons.

Day 34—Monica is now at Hampstead Rehab Centre (207–255 Hampstead Rd, Northfield, South Australia 5085) and she is in bed 27, Ward 2B.

Day 36—Monica is doing well in rehab. she has a nice room (big one) and has been doing lots of physio and speech therapy...they have made her stand up on both twice since being there...the staff seem very caring. The first week of her stay she is being assessed by the rehab team and next week Monica and I will have a meeting with them to discuss her status and set some goals for her to achieve. I told her this and she replied “ I want to be back to normal and be able to look after my 2 children”.....a very good sign from her...she is much more alert overall now except after physio as it tires her out.

Day 38—Sarah, Lucas and I went to see Monica after school—she had been a wheelchair for some hours and was again in good spirits...the kids did some drawings with her. Monica cried after writing “I love you so much” to the kids.... she also was a bit depressed again about her situation and I tried to re-emphasize that the rehab centre is there to help her get back on her feet and use her left arm... I suggested she will be walking out of the centre...but she said “I will be running out”.....she is very determined.

Day 39—Eva has returned to Switzerland (thanks Eva for your support during your stay with us) and Anne Affolter (another good friend of Monica) has arrived, Monica was sad that Eva had gone but happy to see Anne.....we spent some 3 hours with her today and took her out to the courtyard...the sun had been shining in the morning but it was overcast now and a little cool....Monica is happy to outside as she is getting bored when there is nothing to do, esp. the weekend.

Monica showed us how she can move her left leg a little.

This is a big step forward again and shows the value of the physio.

Day 41—Monica had a good session with the physio today....when I got there Monica was being brought back from physio....the physio told me that Monica could almost take a few steps whilst holding onto the plinth (parallel bars) but it was a bit early to put her under this pressure. She also felt some activity in her left shoulder. All good signs.

Day 42—Monica and I met with the rehab team to discuss Monica's progress and set goals—the doctors suggest that Monica may be in rehab for at least 3 months and she has made good progress even after only 1 week there...Monica has re-emphasized that she wants to get back to "normal" life.....a weekend trip should be possible within a few weeks with a review of her progress in 4 weeks. (Monica was very emotional during the meeting as she is frustrated with her situation and keeps telling me that it is very hard what she is going through...she wanted her beads etc to make rings, bracelets and necklaces etc brought in so she can start doing something with her free time (only during weekends does she really have a lot of free time as there is no therapy sessions then)

Day 44—Monica made some more progress today as she has some movement in her left hand. She can squeeze it ever so slightly. But enough to suggest movement can come back. Monica's Mum rang on her mobile last night—it was the first time they had been in contact since her aneurysm...and Monica cried (and I guess her Mum did too)

Day 48—I went to participate in a physio session with Monica to learn how to get her in and out of a wheelchair. this is to enable Monica to have a home visit (scheduled for June 9th)...one of the team will come with her home and determine if we need any ramps etc in order for her to get around

the house and go to the toilet.

Day 49—Monica was able to take 5 steps today. Even using her left leg. There is more movement in her left side now...she is making really good progress even though she says it is really hard for her to do these movements but her determination is great!!!

Day 51—Monica told us that she had taken a few steps using a walking stick and no other support, a fantastic effort. She is really determined to get movement back in her left side and practices all the time....but keeps telling us how hard it is for her to do it.....we can only imagine how difficult it is!!!

Day 55 & 56—Monica was in very good spirits after having some good physio sessions—she took several more steps using her left foot—she also looks more “with-it” i.e. more alert.

Day 57—Monica came home today with 3 physiotherapists to evaluate the set-up at our house with going to the toilet and showering (for when Monica can do overnight stays)—there weren’t too many problems except we have to have hand rails installed in the toilet and shower for obvious reasons. Monica was very emotional as you can expect after being away for nearly 2 months. Monica has been moved to Bed 4—with a nicer outlook onto a courtyard and more light into her room.

Day 60—Monica’s Mum (Lucia) and Aunty (Laura) arrived today whilst Anne left for Hobart, Sydney, Uluru, Cairns etc (thanks Anne for helping with the kids) and Monica came home for 4 hours—it was very emotional for her as you could imagine with plenty of tissues being used. We spent the time and enjoyed the unusual winter sun. Monica showed us how she can lift her left leg from the ground to the footrest on her wheelchair—another step forward for her.

Day 65—Monica took some 22 steps today—a big effort for her but she was very tired after this as you can imagine.

Day 67—Monica came home for 5 hours and had many visitors during the day...it was a bit tiring for her but I'm sure she appreciated their visit.

Day 68—(June 20th) 2nd meeting with the rehab team to discuss Monica's progress—in all areas Monica has made great progress—a new goal was set that is for her to be able to walk unaided with a walking stick by the next meeting (July 18th), if she achieves this she can probably come home for the whole weekend i.e. stay overnight—this will make her visit a bit more relaxed.

June 25/26—Monica has had a very good week with her physio sessions and has walked about 15 meters with a quad stick and assisted by only 1 person. She hopes to be able to walk around the ward in a similar fashion by the end of the next week's therapy.

Monica had 2 home visits this weekend—Sat she was a bit tired and went home early but Sunday she had a good day and we had most of my family over to see Monica and farewell Lucia and Laura.

June 28—Yesterday Monica was able to walk around the ward using a squad stick with me steadying her—what an achievement. She was supposed to get to this by the end of the week...not the beginning...

July 4th—Monica had a good day at home on Saturday but didn't come home on Sunday due to Sarah's concert (which went very well for her)—today I watched the physios helping Monica bend her left leg and get her stability up and then help her walk around the ward. We were supposed to have the meeting with the neuro team to decide when they will put the bone back in her skull but unfortunately the doctor was sick so it has been delayed a bit. We were not impressed but it can't be helped as people all over the place are coming down with colds, the flu and tummy bugs.

July 10th—Louis, Mini, Clare (Sarah's best friend from Sydney) and Ella arrived—the kids had a great time together except towards the end of the week Sarah Lucas became ill with fevers and coughs—thanks to the Maneras for visiting us and helping me (Vince) with the kids. Vince quit his job this week as it wasn't easy ferrying kids to and fro school/kindy, visiting Monica, doing stuff around the house and working at the same time.

July 15th—Monica's cousin (Elisa) arrived today from Italy (Milan) and will stay for some 6 weeks. Monica has been doing well in the last few weeks with more movement apparent in her left arm and hand. They gave Monica an injection in her left calf muscle to relax it to enable the foot to be kept at 90o to the leg—this allows her to walk better as the foot will stay flat when walking.

July 18th—we had the 3rd client goal meeting today to discuss Monica's progress.....Monica will most likely be home around Sept or Oct...A nice goal would be Sept 11th...Her 40th birthday...as she says "life begins at 40"...We hope she can have an overnight stay on July 30th—we celebrated Vince's Mum's 80th birthday at his sister Rita's place and Monica came along as well, she also slept in her own bed for the first time since the aneurism. We didn't stay too late at the party as Monica gets tired quickly but Monica did enjoy seeing just about all of my family.

August 1—Monica and I went to see the Neurosurgeon and he advised she will probably get the bone put back in her skull within 6 to 8 weeks....and the other 2 aneurysm may not be aneurisms after all....and if they are they would not operate for another 6 months to fix these...Monica is reasonably happy about the timing of her bone replacement.

August 2nd—The cast on Monica's left leg was removed today and she was measured for a special splint (to keep her

foot at 90o to her leg)—she won't get the splint for nearly 2 weeks but is using an interim splint....even with this one she is walking better than before...and after having the conversation with the neuro yesterday and the cast removed she looks much better within herself.

August 4th—Monica played table tennis today (this is quite a regular part of the therapy programme)—see photos section

August 7th—another weekend visit—on Sunday we spent the day with Lacy & Scott (who live near the beach at Glenelg) and we took Monica out for a walk and then some nice Italian Gelato...she enjoyed this very much.

August 8th—Monica did some hydro-therapy today and according to Elisa was very mobile in the water moving both legs....she enjoyed the time in the water very much. It was at a nice temperature too. I had a meeting with the Neuro-psychologists today and they said Monica had definitely turned a corner recently in her rehab (for the positive) they are looking to change her anti-convulsive medicine to a less dulling type so she should seem more with-it once this is done.

August 10th—Monica will have her skull bone replaced on Sept 16th.it was to be August 17th (which seemed early) and Monica was very happy to have it done whilst Elisa was here but it is not to be...now Monica is annoyed that she was told one date only to told it would be a later date—at least Monica can spend the last week of Elisa's time here together rather than recovering from the op.

August 12th—Monica spent another weekend at home and last night we all went out to a pub to celebrate our brother-in-law's (Marty) birthday, and Monica was able to walk to and from the car—her walking is improving all the time. Her energy level is also improving as she stayed up late last night as everyone came back to our house for cake and coffee.

August 15th—another progress meeting with the staff at Hampstead and good reports of Monica's progress, with the timing of the bone replacement set it appears Monica will probably go back to Hampstead for about 2 weeks after the operation/recovery before being discharged—this makes it around early to mid October...she might be home for Luca's birthday.

August 18th—Monica had a very good OT session today and she can roll her left wrist, she is also walking much better and a lot more everyday. Monica has an email address: camoni2@hotmail.com she will be happy to hear from any of you out there and checks it every day.

August 24th—Monica came to Sarah's school today (walking from the car) and caught up with many mothers and teachers there...Sarah was very happy to see her mother at school again. We had a bit of a send off for Elisa who is returning to Milan after nearly 6 weeks here—her support for Monica was invaluable and Monica will need to rely on my visits along with other friends who can drop in to see her at Hampstead. Monica and Elisa cried a lot this night.

August 25th—Elisa left to go back to Italy today so we are on our own again.

August 28th—after a nice evening together (the first time we have spent an evening alone together as a family since Monica's aneurysm) Monica prepared and cooked crepes for us and some friends (see photo) for Sunday lunch...yum!!!!

Monica will be using her old mobile i.e. 0400-171298 or 00-61-400171298 as of Sept 1. (Or ring 00-61-8-82221600 and ask for Monica in ward 2B—the will bring a phone to her room)

SEPTEMBER

The 11th was Monica's 40th birthday and we had some friends and family over to help her celebrate this special day...

a day we thought she might not have made it to after the events of April 13. Monica was very emotional, she had a few phone calls from overseas which made her cry as did seeing friends—there were lots of kids running around in our backyard during the day....we were going to have it in a park but since it was meant to rain (and it did on several occasions) we had it at our place.

Lucas had his first visit to the school he will be attending on Oct 17th

Monica has had her operation (in the Royal Adelaide Hospital) to have her piece of skull bone replaced today (see photos)...She was in pain after her op but today (Sat) she was in good spiritsshe is in Ward R5B...she can be reached on 61-8-82224519 and ask the nurse to take a phone to her (pls don't try to call her on her mobile until mid next week as it is difficult for her to reach her phone)

After a shorter than expected recovery from surgery Monica is back at Hampstead this afternoon (Monday) only 3 and a half days in the hospital. she is very good spirits even if she looks a little "puffy" around the eyes as a result of the operation.

Today (the 27th) we had our final client goal meeting as Monica's discharge date has been set as Oct 12th...she is a little apprehensive about coming home as she leaves the safe and well supported environment of Hampstead to a place where her care is shared with 2 little kids..ie no 24 hour service!!!!

OCTOBER

After almost 6 months since her aneurysm Monica finally came home today for good (the 12th)...she will still be receiving physio etc as part of the outpatient programme (she is looking forward to getting on with the physio as she is very determined to get back to "normal") Monica was hoping to

run out of Hampstead but this was not to be. at least she was able to walk out....and she shed many tears saying goodbye to the staff who have given her part of her independence back—see photos Lucas started school on the 17th..He was dressed in his school clothes at 6:15am and ready to go.... everything went smoothly as we expected and he is making friends quickly.

Monica is quite happy at home and is feeling good about being here...she thought it would be much worse esp. her interaction with Sarah and Lucas...Lucas ran to her and gave her a big hug on several occasions when we went to get the kids from school. We have settled into a routine with ferrying the kids to school...Monica usually doesn't accompany me in the morning as she likes to sleep in (except for Lucas' first day at school) but has been there every time I have picked them up.

Monica has started her rehab programme through BIRCH—(Brain Injury Recovery, Community and Home) a therapist has come to our home for OT (hand therapy) and Monica has gone to the BIRCH centre for physio on her leg—in the next weeks her programme will begin to ramp up with something on every day of the week (actually it will be on 3 days with 2 for resting)

After more than 3 weeks back home I think Monica is settling in back to a "normal life". Except with a lower level of service....only joking. She is really enjoying the rehab work at BIRCH and last Monday she was really tired by the end of the day after several sessions plus 45 minutes in the pool—and there is more movement in her hand/arm and less extent left leg as a result.

Monica is helping me with cooking, making the beds, folding clothes etc....and one of the tasks she enjoys is reading with the kids.ie helping with their homework. (Lucas has set-

tled in to school life quickly and it almost seems a lifetime ago that he was a kindy boy)—

November—Monica is making some progress with her walking and movement in her left arm and hand thanks to the good physio etc she is receiving at BIRCH—all the people there are very nice and extremely dedicated to recovery of their clients (not patients anymore). Monica is enjoying therapy in the pool—the physios are very happy with her work in the water (at 34oC...Very nice temp)

It seems highly unlikely that we will get to do our drive around the coast to Melb, Syd and beyond in the New Year as it will interrupt Monica's rehab schedule—we will probably wait until Easter (during the kids school break)—this means we will have to find other things to do with the kids during the Xmas holidays.....ouch. (Monica will be further down the recovery road and should enjoy the journey better than if we do it in the New Year)

December—after more than 8 months Monica was back at the beach (Aldinga Beach where we can drive our cars onto the sand—not Pt Willunga which Monica loves because is not accessible to her at this stage) where she was easily able to walk in the compact sand with her quad stick (see photo) even though it was a very windy day. The kids had a great time playing soccer and making sand castles (we went with Scott, Lacy and their kids)—it was our first trip to the beach this summer.

We have been advised that Monica's rehab programme will run until early June next year giving her almost 8 months of this outpatient programme. Monica has also started receiving acupuncture to try to get her left foot flat—surgery has been mentioned as a way to lengthen her calf muscle which is keeping her for in a pigeon toe fashion and makes it hard for her to walk properly—she is walking a lot but her balance

will improve immensely if she can keep her foot flat.

Sarah turned 7 on the 17th and had a nice party (most of the kids who attended were her classmates from school) at a kid's cafe where they did crafty things (see photos)

Xmas day we had a family gathering at Candy's place and as usual we sat around all day eating (not really a bad thing). We spent New Years Eve at Candy and Marty's shack with just the kids....it was 42.5oC on the 30th (pew that was hot!!!!!!... the hottest day in Adelaide in 2005) and 39oC on NYE so we spent a lot of time at the beach and even went there after dinner for an hour when the temp was much more pleasant (see photo of Sarah and Lucas with an Aldinga Beach sunset behind them)...well that was 2005, a very bad for us and our extended family (the death of Marty's sister-in-law in a car accident, Vince's dad having a blood clot in his leg and chest and Marty's Mum suffering poor health....we are very glad to see the back of that year and trust 2006 will be better....HAPPY NEW YEAR, BUON ANNO etc

2006

January

Stephane visited us again (this is his 6th time he has visited us on his down under tour) in early January and spent 3 days with us—it was good to see him again esp. for Monica's spirit.

The New Year is underway and (4 weeks of holiday have passed without too many dramas) Sarah and Lucas have completed VACSWIM (9 days in 2 weeks of swimming lessons) where they learn more in this period than during a term of lessons due to compressed nature i.e. they remember what they learned yesterday rather forgetting after week (get it??).

Vince has been doing a few projects around the house and would like to start upgrading the outside games room (need some windows and an ensuite so guests don't have to come

into the house for their ablutions!!)

The hot weather has finally arrived in Adelaide with a vengeance—4 consecutive days above 40oC....40.5, 41.8, 43.1 and 40.8...and not much breeze at night (the minimum last night was 33.5oC...Ouch) making it very difficult to sleep...we decided to go to Aldinga on the 43oC day. The forecast was for 42....we had a good time in the water with even Monica going in for a dip. Albeit with a lot of help from Vince. Lucas has improved in confidence in the water and swims with his head in the water quite easily...no doubt a result of the VACSWIM programme.

Monica's walking progress has been so slow that the physios at BIRCH suggested she might benefit from an operation to lengthen her calf muscle, this would allow her foot to sit flat and hence be able to walk properly and also possibly without the need for a quad stick afterwards. We went to see an orthopedic specialist on Jan 20th and he has booked her in for the operation on Feb 20 (probably just an overnight stay in the hospital it will be in a private hospital as it is elective surgery and will be the first time we have needed to use our private medical cover since the aneurism...so far it has cost us nothing...nada...not a red cent)—she will have to be in a cast for almost 6 weeks (which makes getting in and out of the shower interesting) and can only have physio etc on her arm during that time...but that may be a good thing as her left arm/hand could benefit from the concentrated effort.

February

Narelle (aka Nelli) visited us from Sydney (actually Moss Vale some 130km SE of Sydney) and stayed with us for a week—she gave us good morale support during her stay and gave Vince a break from his carer duties...thanks Nelli for spending time with us.

21st—Monica has had the operation on her left foot to lengthen the Achilles tendon and calf muscle....she will be home tomorrow (22nd) her leg is in a cast...we will be seeing the surgeon on March 3rd to know exactly how long she will need to keep it on for and when she can put weight on i.e. when she can start walking on it again. From next week she will re-commence her rehab work albeit concentrating on her left hand and arm as mentioned above.

March

It's almost 2 weeks since the operation and Monica is getting around quite well with her cast (she got a new one on the 3rd as the surgeon checked her scar and had to correct her toes from curling down—the scar was quite amazingly very thin as the stitches were below the skin....I was expecting to see the usual zigzag pattern but this was not the case)..Her physio has stated that her balance is heaps better now since the op so one can hope this will only get better after the cast is removed.

We bought a new printer which allows us to scan slides...so with 3,000 slides from her various trips over the last 20 years Monica has set about converting these to digital images...she has done about half in just over a week...almost becoming attached at the hip with the printer....in doing this she is reliving her trips which she is enjoying immensely. There is a section in the photos which will show some from her travels (will change each month).

After a successful operation to separate Monica from the printer (they were joined at the hip!!!!!!) Monica emerges from surgery with both her and the printer doing well.

Monica has finished scanning all her slides now and is back into writing her life story (up to 74 pages at this stage)

Today (the 15th) Monica was able to walk with a simple cane style stick and walked with ease—the physio was very

pleased with her although she will have to check Monica at home before allowing her to progress to use of this style of walking aid

Appendix B

**Comments from friends / people (extract from
guestbook on website and emails received after
announcing the terrible news.**

**(Taken from the website he initiated after my aneu-
rysm to keep people all over the world updated with my
progress)**

We have only just learned of Monica's condition and are shocked by the news. We've read your diary of events surrounding this and it is almost unbelievable! Please accept our best wishes and let Monica know we are thinking of her and hope her recovery is progressing well.

Chaque jour avec vous en pensées !
Monica : I know you're gonna win !

Dear Monica,

Your progress is inspirational, keep up the effort. Will come and visit soon. You are in our thoughts and prayers. Love and best wishes
Love,

Vince, thank you so very much for keeping this site updated for us all to be a small part of this incredibly challenging journey with you, Monica, and the children. I have tears just realising how hard you have both worked to get Monica to a stage of coming home in the next week. I wish we could have been there and helped in some small way. Our love and wishes are with you all.

Still have such wonderful memories of the time that Monica and I spent together on our travels albeit such a long time ago—she is a very special person to have met in one's life.

How devastating my love,

I have just gone through the website. I am not surprised that you have hung in there and are winning. That is just YOU.

Big hugs and I know you will win to a full recovery.
Love lots and strength

Thank you very much for the news... As I know her, she will fight and she will win... no doubts... I'm very very happy to hear that she waves and I would like so much know how she feels

But I understand it might take some time. I would so much be with you all at the moment and help you, give you support, make the kids laugh and give you as much love as all the love I feel for Monica... tell her I send her Reiki everyday and that I love her so so so much and I trust her... she will recover even faster than the doctors think.... (They don't know her ;-)).

The new is terrible; we have to learn every day how life is precious....

I'm happy to read that Monica is on a positive evolution, even if it will probably take some time... I hope it's not too difficult for you and the children, I'm sure they understand and they will help their mother for recovering. Please let Monica know how much I care even if I'm not very present, she's been so important in my life, that she'll always be in my mind.

Please, let me know about the evolution ... I feel terrible not to be in touch more often but I'm really concerned.

I really hope she'll be fine and I know she has a lot of positive energy to help her inside.

Keep in touch

Thank you for your message, what a shock to learn the bad news.

Unfortunately, I can't do anything to help you physically, but you have to know that we think of you sincerely and we send you much positive energy so you can cross as best as pos-

sible this hard time. I trust that Monica find force and energy to be restored, she's got a strong personality!

Special" bonjour" to Monica.

It's only just now (May 3rd) that I opened your e-mail to hear that Monica had a very severe health problem, and it made me very sad. I am so sorry for her, but I know she is a fighting woman and she will recuperate, I hope, very soon

I read that Monica is strong, and I know she is very positive, and with this way of thinking the recovery will be better. Please give her plenty of kisses and hug her from my part.

"Salut ma grande, je savais que tu voulais que je vienne en Australie, mais je ne savais pas que tu me feras un coup pareil pour que je vienne te voir chez toi. Tu nous a fait la peur du siècle et j'espère que c'est fini. J'aimerais être près de toi tous les jours être là pour les enfants. J'ai une trouille pas possible de monter dans ce putain d'avion. Il faut que je me patche et que je m'achète des chiclettes à la nicotine. Donc je me choute tout ça pour toi. Cela veut dire que je t'aime beaucoup, beaucoup!!! A part ça, je suis très inquiète de laisser ma petite famille sans moi parce qu'ils sont complètement nuls tous. Ils ne savent absolument rien faire (nettoyage, lessive, bouffe!!! surtout Michel) mais j'espère que mon absence sera bénéfique aussi pour eux (on peut rêver)! Je sais que tu ouvres un des deux yeux. J'espère que pour moi tu vas ouvrir les deux et que tu vas me dire "je t'aime Maman".

I'm happy to read that Monica is making progress and responding positively.

Fortunately she's always been very positive about life in general and this will help her a lot... but it must be very hard to be

strong in such a situation.

je suis comme toi, une battante et tout comme toi on s'est toujours releve et on se relevera toujours. Pas vrai? Et meme si je ne peux pas etre a tes cotes aujourd'hui, je le deplore sincerement, ce qui me rassure et m'encourage dans tout ce qui vient de t'arriver c'est que je sais que tu es une vraie battante et que tu te releveras encore plus forte. So keep the faith.

It is good that Monica is at rehab and seems that she has a positive frame of mind which should help in speeding up her recovery.

I enjoyed seeing you both again and was pleasantly surprised at how well Monica was doing. She is a woman of strength and great character. To have survived is fantastic. To improve and get back to where she wants to be will be a long tough journey. In my own way, I've been through it with 2 bouts of bowel cancer.

Family and friends are everything. Keep close to loved ones. Share your emotions. Give regular hugs and squeezes. Keep your minds on the big picture and deal with the glitches as they occur. Vince; parenting will be very difficult for you for the next year or so. My son's behaviour worsened dramatically when I was in hospital for 11 weeks. He was frightened and uncertain and felt his world was imploding. Your kids are lovely and they will test your limits over and over again. Keep them informed and make them a part of Monica's recovery. Play lots. Take them out to eat lots. Let them see your love for Monica and how you guys are working together to get your lives back to where they should be. Monica, you are an inspiration. Keep up your rehab and keep your eye on where you

want to be a month at a time I'll drop in to see you again. Love and best wishes.

Hi Monica your emails are good to read! I'll keep checking them. How's your progress? Are you building strength in your arm and leg? I hope you are feeling happier. I guess its just small incremental steps to get back to your former strength and happiness. I think about you often and also Vince and your children. It's a very tough time for your whole family. My own battles with cancer taught me a great deal about taking things a day at a time and not over stressing about the things you cannot control. Keep as well as you can and rest assured that you have friends and family who care deeply for you. Much love

Je suis vraiment heureux que tu aies pu rentrer enfin à la maison et retrouver ta famille. Je pense que la réhabilitation totale sera encore longue, mais pense que tu as énormément de chance dans ton malheur. Peu de gens s'en sortent aussi bien que toi après un tel accident cérébral.

We have only just learned of Monica's condition and are shocked by the news. We've read your diary of events surrounding this and it is almost unbelievable! Please accept our best wishes and let Monica know we are thinking of her and hope her recovery is progressing well.

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