

March 8

The Hard Won Sucker

Here's an excerpt from an email we sent out to some friends last Monday (March 5).

I said we were going to write an email and Phoebe said, "Let's tell them about my sucker." So here's the story.

She says: "I broke my sucker. I ate my sucker at the doctor and it was kind of yummy. I read a lot of books at the doctor too."

I suggest, "Do you think you should tell them something about your arm?"

She says, "Yeah, I wanna tell them that I had an X-ray on my arm. And I wanna tell them I read some books. I got a bandana and a white thing on my arm..."

I suggest, "Should we tell them that you broke your arm?"

She says, "Yeah. And that I fell off of the fence. I was climbing on the fence. I feel better now. It doesn't hurt now. It hurt yesterday."

So that's Phoebe's story.

Adam asks, "Why did you fall off the fence?"

She says "I don't know."

Adam says, "Did Zeke get his big head stuck in a fence?"

Zeke says, "Head!" (touches his head). "Stuck! Ha ha ha!"

Phoebe wants to tell you now that she's going to color.

So Phoebe played on a fence yesterday, just about a meter tall. Zeke happened to get his head caught in the bars and start crying. When Phoebe looked down at him she crashed head first, head hitting wrist. After a long night of waking up crying, we went to the doctor. After an incredible wait, she got an X-ray, smiled for the "photo," and got a sucker, which we dropped on the floor. She sobbed because the sucker broke, and continued sobbing the whole time they put on the cast, but now seems totally fine, with one of her Daddy's cool bandanas as a sling (she didn't like the one they gave her). She tells Zeke proudly, "Look Zeke, I broke my arm!" And flaunts her new sucker in front of him (we found her another one at home.) She's back to making sharks out of Legos, eating a whole plate full of broccoli and rice, and even "reading" a book to her brother. The cast should come off in 3 weeks.

The Hard Won Health Care

I feel I should also tell the rest of the broken arm story.

There are two hospitals near us. Emmaus Hospital, just a fifteen minute drive from our house, offers free and reduced rates for nearly anyone, so it's usually packed with the poorest of the Zulus. The other hospital, in Ladysmith 45 minutes away, charged us an arm and a leg when we went there to get our visas, but those high fees keep it less busy, with more doctors and specialists, as the unofficial upper class hospital.

Considering this wasn't a life threatening condition, I decided to try out Emmaus. I generally dislike the idea of driving and paying for privileged facilities when I can join my Zulu brothers and sisters in what is often their only option.

We stepped out of our car into a maze of small buildings, with more Zulu signs than English. The hospital was built nearly a century ago as a mission, and seems to have added buildings haphazardly ever since. I found a sign for "X-ray" and pushed Phoebe up a steep hill, thankful Adam had suggested we bring the stroller.

In broken English, a woman informed me there that I must first register at another building, back down the hill. There a line ran far out the door.

I stood weighing my options—was it worth the wait, when I could just drive to another city? Was the line moving? Were all those people in the room inside there waiting for what I would wait for? I watched a woman just ten people ahead of me take her turn at the window. Good, we're moving. Surely it won't be long once we register.

I stared at the shoes of the girl in front of us. It seemed they had once been white, but now were brown and caked with half an inch of mud on the bottom. It had rained all last night. I pictured waking up sick and sliding through a yard of mud to a taxi. It was a day to see what I have to be thankful for, even if the lesson would push me to my limits.

We made it to the desk, but with Phoebe now in tears, I misunderstood the woman's instructions. I was supposed to get Phoebe weighed by a nurse and return to the registration desk. Instead I pushed the stroller up the hill a second time, got rejected, and turned back down.

A half hour later, with all my cards and signatures in hand, we rolled up again to the X-ray room. A nurse directed us to a chair and explained I would go after the woman in front of me. She also kindly told me we could get cell phone reception just at one place on the property, at the top of the hill next to a big tree.

I called Adam, now two hours after we left home. Feeling optimistic, I told him we were through the worst and should see a doctor in thirty minutes.

For the next hour, we read the couple books we had packed for Phoebe, and she drew a cat. She wined some, even cried some, but we hung in there.

My Australian humanitarian friend Sofi appeared, the only white face I had seen all day. She was there taking a group of three orphans to register for welfare grants. For children like these, with no birth certificates and no parents, it's a process so complicated these kids would never complete it without Sofi's persistence. But the money will mean food, health, and even life, for their near future.

Sofi pointed out that there was only one doctor on duty, even though we were facing a hallway full of rooms. "They're short staff, as usual," she said. "Those rooms have no doctors, just a bunch of nurses picking their noses."

We waited. Phoebe smiled and greeted the women near us. One woman a few seats away went in. We must be getting close.

Then suddenly everyone stood up and shifted one seat over. What's this? No—it couldn't be! The line had only just then *begun* to move. Every other person entering those rooms was an emergency patient, who continued interrupting the line the whole time I was there. Each time another emergency case arrived, the woman next to me would exchange shrugs with me. We would wait that much longer. But how could we complain when we were watching women on gurneys and men with foot-long patches of blackened burns taking our place in line?

By now Phoebe had had it. She slept no longer than three hours at time the night before, waking us all up crying. Now, at a painful twist of her wrist, she burst into a tantrum and flailed in my arms, kicking the man with the toothache next to me.

I carried her outside and stood listening to her wailing, ready to cry myself. Finally she calmed down enough for me to come inside. A nurse arrived with a cup of pain reliever, and she gulped it down.

We shared the raisins, peanuts, two peaches, and one granola bar I had packed. It was nearing one o'clock, four hours after we left home. I had not planned to need lunch.

Sofi passed on her way out. "Their birthdays were printed wrong on their birth certificates." She was rushing the words, and I recognized the sound of fighting back tears. "We waited six months for those certificates, got this bloody far, and Home Affairs fuffed em up." All she they could do was restart the whole process, nearly a year of work.

"It's like, if there is a God, come down now." Sofi took the children's hands and walked out.

Meanwhile Phoebe, drugged on pain killer, was flying high. She wandered in circles between the patients, singing to herself. I stared at the man in front of me. Blood

dripped down his arm from a red bandage, onto his ragged jeans. A nurse draped a sheet over his lap, and he took his turn with the doctor. I spoke in Zulu with the woman next to me, learning that she had a four year-old boy.

“You know what song that was?” Phoebe suddenly climbed onto my lap. I confessed I hadn’t been listening to her babble song.

“It’s called, ‘The Lord is Here.’”

Now Phoebe has heard a lot of Christian songs in her three years, but this wasn’t any real song. This she made up, just today. She couldn’t have brought any more timely message.

The line moved on, and we sat just three people from the end. Phoebe climbed into her stroller and took a nap. The doctor left for a lunch break, and patients lined up out the door while we waited—nobody moving, a room of silent sick, for another hour.

I stepped outside to make another phone call. There I notice the picture etched on the side of the building. It showed a man with a cloth draped around his waist, lying limply in the arms of another person. Knowing it was a mission hospital, I guessed it was something Biblical. But nothing told who it was. The good Samaritan helping the bloody traveler? Jesus holding a sick person he was about to heal? Or was it Jesus, dead in the arms of a friend?

Back inside, I watched Phoebe’s head bobbing left, then right. I supposed that picture might have been any of the three. Jesus and his followers might be healing some of us today. For others, like Sofi’s orphan friends, Jesus was the one dying in somebody’s arms, more hurt than anybody by the injustice of this world.

I shared my last peanuts and raisins with my neighbor. A boy with his arm in a sling took his turn with the doctor. Later that same boy would appear miraculously by our car, just when Phoebe was sobbing that she hated her new cast. He would smile at Phoebe, and Phoebe would smile back. Here was a friend who had gone through just what she had. From that moment on Phoebe didn’t complain once about the cast.

We arrived home six hours after we had left. Phoebe crawled into bed after a belly-full of blue yogurt (she told me her favorite color was blue, so we pulled out the food coloring), and I told the whole story to Adam. By the end my tears flowed freely. Adam wrapped me in his arms like a child—or like the picture on the Emmaus Mission Hospital wall.