

my life



With the wattle

Kate Rotherham, WINNER OF THE MY CHILD/PARENTING EXPRESS WRITING COMPETITION, REFLECTS ON THE JOYS OF FAMILY AFTER THE LOSS OF A LOVED ONE

The vet explains it as gently as he can and my children absorb the news in lip-wobbling silence. They crowd around Mawson, our wilting golden retriever, and reach for his worn-out body.

Lochie sucks in his cheeks and blinks away his tears. Henry simply cannot. He buries his face in Mawson's furry neck, sobbing, 'Please stay alive.' Annie crouches on the floor, whimpering, and pulls her T-shirt up over her head. Pippa, on my hip, says 'Mawsy' over and over. Traffic whirs past the window and I take deep, empty breaths, trying to absorb their grief.

We bring Mawson home and bury him at dusk near the lemon-scented gum. We huddle together as the surrounding hills darken to purple and the winter chill settles on each of us.

On top of the freshly turned earth, they place a card telling him he was the best dog in the world, a rock shaped like a heart and a posy of electric-yellow wattle. We sing a family song, *May the long time sun shine upon you...*

Later, under a watchful moon, we drive to town. The kids are fresh from the bath in their slippers and fleecy dressing gowns. Their curls are damp and their eyes are wide at the prospect of a night-time excursion. We tumble into the buzzing Friday night crowd at the pizza place where the air is thick with laughter and the smell of melting cheese. My husband and I, utterly wrung out from the emotion of the day, slide into our chairs and order quickly.

A young woman with a thick plait arranges music sheets and tunes her guitar. When she begins to sing *Remember the days of the old school yard, we used to laugh a lot*, our children rush over to the tiny space in front of her.

The little one begins to sway and flap her arms, grinning. The others link arms and skip around

each other with random twirls and bounces. We sing along, awed by their jumbled, high-energy choreography. They dance to *Bohemian Rhapsody*, *Piano Man*, *Big Yellow Taxi* and *American Pie*.

Henry concentrates hard on remembering his newly learned Nutbush, his lips counting out the steps and his eyes willing his feet to co-operate, and the others do their best to copy him.

They don't see the waitress weaving between them, holding steaming pizza trays aloft. They don't notice those older kids, sitting up straight in their best going-out clothes, staring at them, nudging each other. At the end of each song they clap as loudly as they can, their little jarmy-clad legs springing lightly, eager for more.

Watching them, my mind zooms through the future with all its frightening unknowns. In rapid time-lapse photography, I see them grow taller and taller and glimpse them fully grown, dancing at each other's weddings, 40ths, 50ths, 60ths.

Will the mysterious connectedness of their DNA and shared childhood bind them through the complex realities of adult life? Will they always have each other?

They return to us, rosy-cheeked, to gulp down big tumblers of water. Annie notices her brothers' glistening foreheads: 'You're all sparkly!' They inspect one another's faces up close and count their tiny beads of perspiration, declaring Henry the sparkliest. He smiles for the first time all day.

We share our pizza and garlic bread. We pour drinks and mop them up when they spill. We clink glasses and toast to Mawson, the best dog in the world. We all laugh when Pippa says, 'More pitza? More pitza?'

I look around our happy, noisy table. It seems as though no time has passed since we first held each of them, breathing in their soft, newborn smell, our tears of pure, heart-thudding love

splashing on their heads. Now, those same heads are busy making sense of the world. They know more about dinosaurs, space and sea creatures than I ever will. Our little boys play chess together with the learned intensity of old men. Our little girl pretends to be a guinea pig for hours on end, eating only carrots and insisting that we call her "Patch". Our cheeky baby says, 'Funny me!' whenever she makes us laugh.

They know now, too, that life ends and that love hurts.

Lochie and Annie go back for more dancing while Henry gathers up our leftover pizza crusts in a red serviette. He wraps them carefully and then unwraps them to add a few more from the highchair. I hold my breath, waiting for him to remember, waiting for an enormous wave of emptiness to swallow him whole.

He pauses and looks up at me, unsure. 'Mum, is it OK if I put this on top, with the wattle?'

As we scoop our little ones up for home, the musician comes across to our table, smiling. She whispers to me, over the top of their sleepy heads, 'Your children are fantastic!'

I hold that little thought close to my heart, like a precious newborn, all the way home. ●

Writing competition

Congratulations to Kate Rotherham, the winner of this year's competition, and well done to Anne Green, Kate Wise and Jason Johnston, who were short-listed. Look out for their stories in future issues of *My Child*. To read more great entries, take a look at parentingexpress.com or go to mychildmagazine.com.au and click on the *stories* tab.