

TRUE LIFE



One Less.

CHRISTMAS IS A TIME
WHEN FAMILY AND
FRIENDS COME
TOGETHER AND IT IS
NOT ALWAYS A
FESTIVE OCCASION

BY KATE ROTHERHAM



Our country hall is full. Excited kindy kids slide across the floorboards, parents compare the craziness of pre-Christmas schedules, and grandparents fan themselves with the program. The stage is scattered with giant crepe-paper flowers and lollipops, like a bright, magical garden. In the foyer each piece of kindy artwork, the wonky and the inspired, is carefully framed with black cardboard.

Our beloved kindy teacher, a woman who I am certain loves these children more than their own mothers some days, steps up to the microphone. I see her take a deep breath in and tuck her hair behind her ear. Her voice wavers through the Acknowledgement of Country. There is a pause. She tries so hard to smile at us, her kindy family. 'It's been...', she swallows, summoning strength from somewhere, 'a very big year for our kindy'.

The fidgeting and fanning stops. I bite my lip and my husband rests his hand on mine. The awful reality resettles heavily on each of us that tonight we celebrate with one less.

Our little people file up onto the stage. They bounce and dance through the

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songs, willing their untamed limbs to cooperate with the actions. The crocodile snaps! The kookaburra laughs! The wombat wobbles! One little fellow waves to his family through the whole song. One little ballerina choreographs her own unique routine, completely oblivious to what everyone else is doing. A few stand rigid, staring straight ahead, desperate for it just to be over.

On that God-awful Thursday the accident happened, the full horror only emerged piece by piece. We waited for confirmation and made cups of tea we couldn't drink, hoping beyond all logic there had been some kind of mistake. Surely, there had been a mistake. By the end of the day our little community, safely nestled in these gentle hills, was hit with a punch-in-the-stomach grief that left us all staggering backwards, collectively winded and gasping for air.

Long, empty, soul-crushing days followed. We gathered and hugged. We cooked meals for others and wondered if we'd ever feel like eating again. Some days we talked about it endlessly, other days we were exhausted beyond speech. The same thought seeped through every layer of our anguish, 'It could have been any one of us.'

A slide show is projected up onto the large screen set to the vibrant, pulsing sounds of African drumming. We watch a glimpse of their happy kindy days. We see our little people painting, gardening, doing puzzles, building towers, blowing out candles. Little faces of intense concentration examining insects. Little faces grinning with pride holding their artwork. Little friends with their arms slung around each other, heads thrown back with laughter.

And then a single photograph of balloons floating up into a bright blue



winter sky, ribbons trailing behind them. And the hall again falls silent with blinked-back tears.

I think back to that impossibly difficult conversation with my own little girl. 'Sweetheart, something really, really terrible has happened.' She climbed on to my knee. Her big hopeful eyes narrowed with the effort of absorbing the incomprehensible. 'But Mummy, will he ever come back to kindly?'

Their names are called, one by one, to meet Santa. Some skip up to him, others are carried, hands gripped tight around the neck of a parent. I know in their lifetime they will feel sorrow again and again, but for most this has been their first experience of grief. We held, and go on holding, their little hands through it as best we can. We kiss their sweet faces with renewed love. We answer those hard questions. We speak more gently. We peek in on them while they sleep, wishing somehow it could all be different. And then we walk back through our homes, picking up Lego, collecting abandoned shoes and discarded books, deeply grateful for the comfort and chaos of our full, messy lives.

I fold small polka dot pyjamas and match little purple socks knowing everything can be taken away in one cruel, random moment. Now I hold these small belongings like the sweet gifts they are, ever mindful of life's fragility. I savour every story I read her. I hold tight to every funny conversation. I try not to sweat the small stuff.

After the concert my little girl, her blonde fringe stuck to her head with the heat, skips ahead to the car. She clutches her book from Santa, 'Henry and Amy', a story of unlikely friends, under her arm. She stops to talk to a little classmate on her way. I watch her place the book carefully on the footpath and wrap her arms around her friend, their little bodies tangled together.

After a long January of swimming at our waterhole she will become a schoolgirl. She will follow her siblings out our stone gateposts and climb up the steps to the big bus and throw her little plucky self at the world. There will be new experiences and new possibilities. There will be new friends, but she will travel her path with one less.

Yet, tucked away carefully in her heart, there will always be one more.