



Remember us this way

Time was running out, and we knew what had to be done.

Lauren Russo, 39, Melbourne, Vic.

Dear Josh,

Ours wasn't love at first sight. We met when I was teaching your psychology class in your final year of school.

Although you did all your work, you were a real joker and I had to keep yelling at you to stop distracting others.

Josh is a capable student who needs to apply himself more in class to reach his full potential, I wrote in your report.

You graduated and I soon forgot all about the mischievous boy I didn't need to scold anymore.

But seven years later our

paths crossed at school again. Only this time, you were a teacher.

You were still a joker and I invited you to my 30th birthday. Later, you asked me out.

Admittedly it felt a bit awkward - I was once your teacher, after all.

Although there was five years in age difference, I couldn't deny our attraction.

"I've always loved you," you confessed.

We started trying for a family and when our beautiful girl, Charlotte, was born you were besotted.

With her dark complexion and thick, curly hair, she was a mirror image of you.

Her sister, Isabella, was born two years later and was



Me, with Isabella, Charlotte and our dog Billy

another replica of her father.

You were such a hands-on dad, changing nappies and feeding the girls.

But when Isabella was three months old, I felt a lump in my right breast.

The doctor said it was just a blocked duct, but it got bigger and looked red.

Back at the doctor's, tests revealed I had triple-negative breast cancer.

You were stunned by the news and felt helpless that there was nothing you could do.

I felt so angry with my body for letting me down.

One week later, my back was hurting badly.

Scans revealed the cancer was now stage four and had spread to both my sacrum and sternum.

"Can it be cured?" I asked.

"I'm sorry, but it's incurable," the doctor said. "We will focus on giving you the best quality of life."

There were treatments options available to make my life as comfortable as possible, so I focussed on that.

You were so overwhelmed. "How can you be so positive?" you asked, fighting back tears.

"Because there's still so

"I felt so angry with my body for letting me down"



Your year 12 photo



In 2003, when I was your teacher



Our wedding day



I've recorded messages for our girls on these 'talking teddies'

your eye. After, we danced to 'Always Remember Us This Way' by Lady Gaga.

So when I'm all choked up but I can't find the words, every time we say goodbye baby, it hurts, she sang. When the sun goes down and the band won't play, I'll always remember us this way.

The words, more than ever, had taken on a whole new meaning.

You drew me into your arms. "I hope people can remember me like this," I told you, knowing that dancing with you brought me so much happiness.

It's been two years since I was diagnosed and, as you know, some days have been harder than others.

But we're still making the most of every moment, going whale watching and on a family holiday to Port Douglas.

The cancer has spread to my pancreas now, but I want you and the girls to know I'm not afraid.

When I'm gone, you'll all have lots of memories of our time together, and I know that through my messages and journals, I'll continue to be a mum.

Josh, you and the girls are the light of my life - I'm so grateful for everything that we've shared.

*All my love,
Lauren xox*

much we haven't done," I said.

We'd been together for seven years and hadn't got married - we'd both become so preoccupied with our busy lives that there'd never been enough time to plan a wedding.

That was going to change.

"I want a big celebration for our girls to remember," I said.

We settled on the botanical gardens for the following year.

I spent the next five months undergoing chemo, radiation and having a lumpectomy to remove 24 lymph nodes.

Surprisingly, my body handled the treatment amazingly well: I barely had any side effects at all.

But then the cancer spread to my brain.

"We've found seven tumours. You need surgery immediately," the doctor said.

You and I cried together, hugging one another until our tears dried.

After the op, I returned home, hiring a nanny to help me with the girls while you went to work.

I'd play Charlotte's favourite song, 'Can You Feel The Love Tonight?' from *The Lion King*,

and dance with her and Isabella.

Whenever I was well enough, we'd go to the park, swim or read stories.

"I need to take advantage of every single day and live the sh*t out of it," I told my mum.

But Charlotte, three, and Isabella, one, were so young that I worried they wouldn't remember me.

So I started writing a blog and journals to record my feelings.

There were so many memories I wanted to share with them: I wrote about my childhood, teenage years, adolescence, becoming an adult and falling in love with you.

"Can I read it?" you asked.

"No," I grinned. "These are my secrets for the girls."

Putting pen to paper, I wrote: *I hope you can learn from my mistakes, take advice and know I wasn't perfect. I have done things I'm not proud of, but I turned out okay, and you will too.*

After learning of my plight, the charity Mummy's Wish

gave me two gorgeous teddy bears that contained voice recorders.

"It's Mummy here. I love you," I said, recording my voice for both so they'd never forget how I sounded.

A year after starting treatment, you and I got stuck into organising the wedding properly.

But two weeks before, I

started losing all my hair and was shocked to discover massive bald patches on my head.

"It doesn't matter what you look like," you said. "You'll always be beautiful to me."

I shaved my head completely, joking how I now had something in common with my brother and dad, who were both bald.

On our big day, the weather was splendid.

An acoustic band played music and kids ran through the gardens.

As you and I promised to love each other in sickness and health, I saw a tear fall from

"I started a blog and journals to record my feelings"