

One last Christmas



Our little fighter

Jade's son Zachary was fading fast, but she was determined to have one last magical moment with her special boy...

might have to deliver him early. My baby's bowel was folding in on itself, cutting off the blood supply.

By week 28, it had perforated and he needed to be delivered by emergency Caesarean.

'It's too soon,' I cried.

But we had no other choice. 'You're both going to be OK,' Rhys soothed.

Six hours later, I gave birth to our son Zachary.

He weighed just 2lb 4oz, and was quickly rushed off to surgery.

His bowel was so damaged, doctors had to remove most of it.

'He's the smallest patient we've ever performed that operation on,' the surgeon said.

It was tough and go whether he would pull through.

'How much more can he go through?'

Racked with worry, I visited him in the special care unit. He was surrounded by tubes and wires, but he was so beautiful.

'Hang on, little one,' I whispered.

Five days after he was born, we were finally able to hold him.

As Zachary struggled to adapt to feeding, he needed to be artificially fed via a tube.

Doctors explained this could affect his liver, but that

the risk was small.

Incredibly, Zachary pulled through.

At three months old, he was finally allowed to meet his grandparents. Everyone adored him.

But just as we thought he was improving, Zachary was diagnosed with liver and intestinal failure.

'He'll need a liver and bowel transplant,' his doctor told us.

Rhys and I were devastated. 'He's not even a year old yet,' I cried. 'How much more can he go through?'

The donor needed to be a size match too, and finding an infant donor was incredibly rare.

Zachary spent his life in and out of hospital.

Despite it all, he grew into a

cuddly, smiley boy, who loved Mickey Mouse, and Buzz and Woody from *Toy Story*.

His development was slow because of the operations, but that didn't seem to bother him.

In time, he learnt to sit up and managed a few words, including 'Mummy' and 'Daddy'.

We were so proud of him.

When he was one, I discovered I was pregnant.

'How are we going to cope with another munchkin?' I worried.

'We've got this,' Rhys reassured. 'Look at everything we've come through.'

Meanwhile, Zachary was placed on the transplant list.

His condition improved a little, and occasionally he was allowed home overnight.

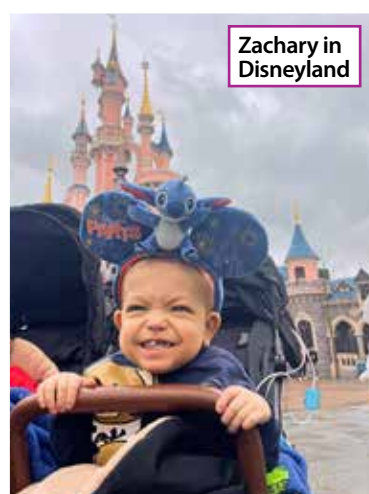
We hardly dared go beyond the end of the street, in case we got a call to say there was a potential transplant.

Still, I treasured having him at home. We'd cuddle up on the sofa, watching Disney movies together.

Whenever the phone rang with a potential transplant, we



Santa came to visit



Zachary in Disneyland

immediately flew from Scotland down to London for tests.

Six times we made that trip. But each time, Zachary was too small for the organs.

By now, I was heavily pregnant, and my midwife said I couldn't keep flying.

In time, I gave birth to a happy and healthy baby boy, named Reuben.

Things were looking brighter, and Rhys and I loved the busy days looking after two boys.

When Reuben was nine months old, Zachary finally had a liver transplant.

It was a success.

But then we faced another obstacle. Zachary contracted sepsis, which damaged his new liver.

He became seriously ill again, and needed another liver transplant.

Yet somehow, our teeny warrior pulled through and was allowed home.

Being immunocompromised

meant that Zachary's social circle was small. But Reuben really brought him out of his shell.

And Zachary doted on his baby brother, and always made him giggle.

Reuben watched everything his big brother did. They loved causing mischief together, as Zachary taught Reuben how to shout 'Mama' all day long, and throw their toys out of the cot.

However, as time went on, Zachary got sicker, and there were

no donors available.

One day, the hospital agreed he was well enough for a short holiday, so we booked a three-day trip to Disneyland Paris with our parents and grandparents.

Zachary couldn't stop grinning, meeting Mickey, Buzz and Woody. The boys had a magical time.

On our final night, we all huddled

together to watch the firework display.

Turning around, I noticed that Rhys was knelt with Zachary in his arms.

'Zachary wants to ask you a question,' Rhys smiled.

'Will you marry Daddy?' he chirped.

'Yes, of course!' I cried as I hugged them.

It was the perfect way to round off the trip of a lifetime.

Sadly, back home, our brave boy deteriorated.

Potential donor matches came through but, as before,

Zachary was too tiny.

Each day I woke up, wishing for a miracle.

Only, then Zachary contracted sepsis again.

Worried about what the future might hold, Rhys and I pulled our big day forward.

I'd always dreamt of a huge white wedding – but none of that mattered now. I just wanted to share it with my two sons as page boys, and Rhys, the man I loved.

As Christmas approached, we wrote letters to Santa.

This year I would love Mickey Mouse toys but the best gift of all would be a new liver and bowel please, Zachary's letter read.

As we posted it to the North Pole, I could only close my eyes and hope for a Christmas miracle.

Afterwards, one by one, we all came down with flu.

Zachary got it the worst, and was hospitalised.

'Can he come home for Christmas?' I begged doctors.

They weren't sure he was well enough but, deep down, I had a heartbreaking fear.

This could be our boy's last Christmas, I thought.

And if it was, I was determined to make it perfect for our amazing lad.

So, when Zachary was discharged on 24 December, our house was decorated with fairy lights and the presents were wrapped and ready under the tree.

A local charity, the John O'Byrne Foundation, arranged for Santa and his elves to call at our house in the morning.

Zachary and Reuben watched, wide-eyed, as Father Christmas made himself comfy on



Reuben and Zachary

our sofa!

And Zachary clapped in delight as he got the Mickey Mouse he'd asked for.

I took a mental snapshot of each priceless moment.

Despite being so poorly, Zachary was loving every moment.

Only, by Boxing Day, he was so weak.

Back in hospital, his kidneys began to fail.

We knew, this time, he wouldn't be coming home.

His body had fought so hard, for so long.

Now, it had given up.

A week later, as he lay in my arms, our brave boy took his last breath.

He was just three years old.

'Sleep tight, my sweet boy,' I whispered through tears.

Leaving without him was unbearable.

Back home, we were confronted with his Christmas presents – some of which he'd never even had a chance to play with.

The months since losing Zachary have been impossibly hard for us.

His cot is still in our room, and his toys and clothes are all over the house.

Two-year-old Reuben misses his big brother terribly too.

In the meantime, I'm trying to raise awareness around organ donation.

No parent wants to contemplate the possibility of losing a child and donating their organs.

But what if you're in the position where your little one needs an organ?

It's something we need to discuss more openly.

In Zachary's name, I hope other lives can be saved.

Jade Bradford, 25, Kirkintilloch, East Dunbartonshire



Me and my son