

## Ladybird Care Foundation Gala Ball, September 24th, 2022

It was balmy at sunset in King George Square. A young opportunist approached the roped-off party watchfully, abducted a bottle from a small table near the string quartet, and retired gleefully to a safe distance to listen to Bach and Mozart between swigs. It was, for him, an unexpectedly luxurious evening.

Within the velvet ropes though, the Gala Ball guests had come prepared for their evening of luxury. Bathed in the ladybird-red lights of City Hall, they moved toward its marbled and mosaiced entrance: rustling gowns, bowties, glasses of champagne. The soaring auditorium was filled with blue haze and now the guests were met by an imposing wall of sound from the massive pipe organ, as organist Johan Kuyler accompanied sisterMISTER's four-piece band with a Toccata of welcome. Twenty-three meters overhead, an enormous, projected ladybird meandered about the vaulted ceiling.

Ladybird Care Foundation's 2022 Gala Ball was typically extraordinary. Duncan Armstrong provided a string of quips and theatrical yarns to the delight of almost 400 glamorous guests. The laughter was loud and genuine, the auction was thrilling, the three-course dinner was sumptuous, the band was rockin'.

It was easy to assume, surveying this happy festivity, that all was joy and glitter. But everyone in attendance was acquainted, directly or indirectly, with the most perverse species of grief.

*A man and a woman move along a shiny hospital corridor towards the exit. They are dimly aware of bustling orderlies, a cleaner, a hubbub of conversations at reception. Outside the big glass doors, birds are singing and there is traffic. They wonder, numbly, at the blithe continuation of life.*

The excitement of Christian Hamilton's live auction was tangible. Luxury holidays, high-end jewellery, and a Caleb Jones original oil on canvas; all go under his brisk and cheerful hammer at a robust final bid. This year, Caleb's ladybird ascends her steep stalk with stoic calm. It is entitled "The Climb".

*A mother buries her face in her son's bed. His scent is strongest on the pillow; she knows one day it will be gone. The future is a sheer, impossible ascent.*

Our brain associates smell with memory. Communications Manager and quiet powerhouse Maree Pascoe introduced Lys Coccinelle, Ladybird's new product line: sublimely scented soaps, essential oils, reed diffusers, room mists and candles. Behind Maree, the brand logo and name on the screen melted into its English translation: Lily Ladybird. There was an audible mass throat-catch and hundreds of eyes welled up. From that moment, the Lys Coccinelle sales counter at the back of the room was gently mobbed.

*A father answers the door. His daughter's best friend stands stricken on the welcome mat. Monstrous reality engulfs him again and he cannot do it, he cannot look at her, he cannot breathe, he cannot be and yet he cannot cease to be.*

Life makes sense until the ambush of unutterable tragedy. What is our purpose, when the miracle and bliss and glory and reason of life are gone, and a raw, screaming chasm is left?

In the words of the Austrian poet Rainer Rilke:

"Does the outer space into which we dissolve  
taste of us at all?"

Are we merely meaning-seeking beings... or is there meaning?

There was a standing ovation after Olympian Lisa Curry took the podium. She demonstrated both raw courage and vivid grief. She spoke with difficulty, but spoke nonetheless, as though the mission matched the effort. As she talked and wept, the vast auditorium was stilled, and every heart understood.

Why does such resolve inspire a crowd to its feet with thunderous applause?

The simple answer is this:

Responsibility. The ability to respond. Respond to what? To everything.  
Even the worst thing.

In fact, the more challenging the discharge of responsibility, the more noble we recognise the effort to be.

*A mother considers two pairs of worn black school shoes, lined up by the back door. They have progressed this far towards the wheelie bin over the past six years. She observes the scuff mark made by dragging one toe behind a scooter. She used to scold him for that. The wheelie bin waits. Maybe tomorrow, she thinks.*

With patience and an outward-facing view, it is possible to transform our abject suffering into a limitless superpower. The suffering remains, but takes on such value that it becomes defined by Meaning. This transformation has all the properties of a miracle. Many of the astonished who have done it have various descriptions of their experience: "purpose-giving", "meaning-rich", "fulfilling", "beautiful", and "a thrilling responsibility". It offers us not merely survival, but an abundance of life, manifold rewards, unpredictable blessings and benefits in all directions. It is an option contained within all of us. Some find it instinctively; some require an example, but there it is: latent and brimming with potential, or active and healing the world.

And mere happiness doesn't hold a candle to it.

*The birthday cake is cut and served around an enthusiastic table. "How come we don't sing Happy Birthday?" asks the youngest. "Well, because it's a loving one, not a happy one," says dad.*

*"And," says the eldest, "singing Loving Birthday would be lame."*

Under the wandering Ladybird, the stories were harrowing and the grief searing. Concurrently, the compassion was immeasurable, and the connections potent. Guests chatted and laughed and danced; grieved and remembered. The small absent loved ones they carried with them compounded the strength and love which they offered one another. This was a microcosm of the world, with its tangle of windfalls and catastrophes; but it was also a microcosm of heaven.

To Rilke's searching question, every soul at this year's Gala would respond a resounding "YES".

Ladybird Care has been working hard. Aside from its plan to offer the invaluable Peer Mentor Program to the whole of regional Queensland, and the launch of Lys Coccinelle, whose proceeds go entirely towards the care of families bereaved of children, the foundation has established Go Dotty Day on October 2nd to raise awareness nationwide, and the inaugural bereaved siblings camp, Take Flight, in Coolumbul over the third weekend in October.

*A woman pauses by a photograph. Her memories are simultaneously painful and dear. After all this time, it's still too hard to comprehend that her sweet, funny, affectionate girl is gone, and she shakes her head, as she does a dozen times a day. Then she makes a phone call, and her voice is gentle. "Hello, lovely. How have you both been this week?"*

There is an acceptance of responsibility within all of us, and therein lies the meaning sought by every human life. Embrace it. Demonstrate it. Something transformative will happen.

At Ladybird Care, something transformative is happening.

