

Festival of Hearts

by

Kylie Burton

It's September 2023 and I'm experiencing the Brisbane Festival through various window shutters of the Queensland Children's Hospital.

Doctor's approval is required to wheel my daughter eight paces, from her bed to the Family Lounge, to view the only festival events that are visible from up here: Four hundred drones lighting up the sky with a stunning Dreamtime story of *Nieergoo: Spirit of the Whale*; twenty minutes of Riverfire fireworks; and several RAAF planes roaring directly over the hospital, on purpose.

But despite these brief reprieves from her illness, my teen sits motionless in her wheelchair, her face expressing nothing, yet revealing everything—a deep sense of loneliness and disconnect—as she looks down towards the crimson Bougainvilleas lining the Southbank pathway, Streets Beach and the city lights beyond. Her world is not in this hospital. Her heart is out there, somewhere down below us, with her friends.

“Do you still love me Mamma?” she asks one night over her Milo and biscuits.

“Of course! More than anything!” I take this moment, wrapping her hands in mine, tears just beneath the surface. My mind scrambles with a combination of lack of sleep and the extreme stress of recently learning that my child is at risk of heart failure.

“*Why* do you love me?” Her voice is soft and tired.

“Cause you’re my girl,” I reply in a thick Alabama accent, like Tom Hanks in *Forrest Gump*.

She smiles weakly. Humour is not what she needs. “No, but really... Why do you love me?” She keeps pushing, eyes wide, heart open.

So I try to be specific, “Because you’re kind, funny, creative...” It’s all true, but it sounds so contrived, so inadequate. A nineties Haddaway song starts playing in my head, *What is Love?* The next line hits hard—I beg that love doesn’t hurt me. But that’s just it isn’t it? It wouldn’t hurt so damn much, if we didn’t love so damn much.

Her iPhone pings. The moment is gone. I crawl into the cold, hospital parent bed, the stiff mattress protector crinkling loudly as I turn away from her, hiding my yearning to still be her final goodnight. A memory comes, when she was five years old and we’d just finished reading, *Guess How Much I Love You?* by Sam McBratney. Measuring her little hand against mine, she’d proudly announced, “Mumma, I love you all the way to African and back...” I chose to savour her cuteness, rather than correct her, as she’d paused, unsure if it was enough, “...Is that very far?”

“Oh yes, my darling girl, that’s very, *very* far. You must love me a *lot!*” I replied, as my heart smiled and melted and grew, all at once.

A tear escapes and drips onto my pillow. I close my eyes and look for comfort in the sound of her breathing. Eventually Ward 8A falls quiet, except for the unsettling sounds of mechanical monitors. *Beep. Beep. Beep...Please. Don’t. Die.*

#