

Kidroid

There's no time like the present.

Shane Clark

Jenny met her first Kidroid when she was seven years old.

"Can I touch it, Daddy?" she asked her father. He was an unassuming man with brown eyes and a bowl-cut that made him look like he was five.

"Sure, Jenny. See the sign? It says you can." Daddy's attempt to teach Jenny how to say the funny letters on the sign fell flat, as she'd already tuned him out. Silly Daddy, she thought. Always talking and talking. Jenny crawled on top of the display box. She rubbed the Kidroid's fuzzy brown hair. She stuck her fingers in the Kidroid's fuzzy brown ears. She tickled its nose. The Kidroid looked at her, blinked once, twice. Then it went back to staring at nothing.

Daddy was talking again, and he was using the louder voice. It wasn't yet the loudest voice, so Jenny knew she had more time. Not like with Mommy, whose no was no. Jenny smacked the Kidroid's side, and punched the top of its head.

OK, loudest voice was here now.

"... Of all the ... ! *Get down here this instant, young lady!*"

Jenny hopped off the pedestal and tugged at her Daddy's pantlegs. "I'm sorry, Daddy, something just came over me!" Those were her new favourite words. She didn't really understand it, but "something just came over me" always made Daddy calm down.

"Just ... just don't do it again, Jenny. Those things aren't toys." He hugged her close. Yup. Like a magic spell.

But their power faded with time, as all childhood magic does. Jenny was nine now, and learning things like classification of mammals and United Nations history in school; she didn't climb on top of display cases anymore. One thing she still did was bug her father.

"Daddy! But ..." her face wrinkled up in a pouting frown.

"No!" He was harder on her now, and Jenny didn't quite understand it. It was something to do with Mom's accident.

"Aw, but ..." But there would be no buts, not anymore. His decision was final.

So, that night, she took matters into her own hands. She'd never done anything like this before: never crept out of her bed after midnight, never taken her bicycle out from the darkened garage. Her back tingled and shook the half-mile down to the shopping mall. She'd tied a flashlight onto the front

of her bike with duct tape for a headlight. It was her only ally. She tried not to think of wraiths and ghosts and wolves, but they thought themselves into her head anyway.

At last, she reached the supermarket doors. She tested the electronic eye — not on. She ran around, tried a few side doors. The third one worked. And then she was inside and staring into the face of a Kidroid.

"Hello," she said.

No answer.

"I'm Jenny."

No answer.

"Mom used to say it would be a bad thing if I got you, because you couldn't keep up with me. But you'd be with me all the time! What do you think?"

No answer.

On her thirteenth birthday, Jennifer asked for one present.

"A Kidroid?" asked Dad. He'd thought she'd grown out of that silly obsession ages ago. "I mean, sure, Jennifer, but don't you think you're a touch old for it?"

"Dad! It's my birthday, right?" Her tone demanded agreement. "And I should get what I want, not what you think it's proper for me to want, right?"

"Well, yes, I assume so ..."

"Good!" She hugged him close, nuzzled his hair. She'd grown so tall these past few years. It was hard for Dad to understand how quickly that'd happened.

She had a party for her friends the day before her birthday, a party for her family the day of. Her grandmother and grandfather and aunts and uncles gave her clothing, money and advice. After they left, Dad went to his closet to retrieve a final present.

"It wouldn't do to have you opening this while everyone else was around ..." he said. Jennifer flung her arms around him, because she knew what it was.

She opened it in her room. It was just like she'd remembered from the supermarket. Just like Sarah's was. Jennifer thought back to the shy, rich girl, the one she'd invited to birthday parties and hopscotch-jumpings when they were eight.

The Kidroid stood a foot tall: fuzzy brown hair, fuzzy brown ears. Tickle-able nose. Robotic gears wound up when she switched it on. Electricity coursed through its semisentient brain.

"Hello, child! And what might your name be?" The voice was sugary-sweet.

"Jenny!"

"And how old are you?"

"Thirteen!" It was imprinting on her, she knew, just like Sarah's had. Soon the Kidroid would be hers. *Hers*.

"That's pretty old. Before I become your friend, I have to ask you a question."

Wait. This wasn't part of the script. "Oh, just a question, dear, just a single question."

"Oh. Okay ..."

"Have you ever lost someone close to you?" The Kidroid's eyes pierced hers.

She was taken aback, but Jenny knew she had to answer. "My mother."

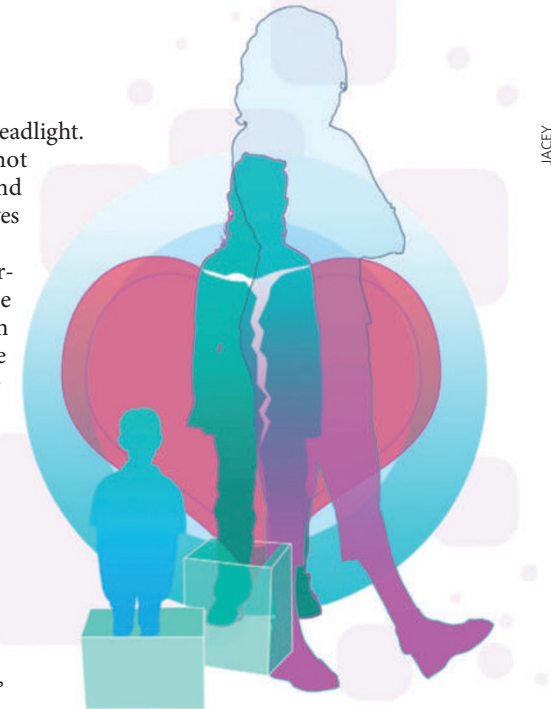
"And do you know what that means, to lose someone? To really *lose* someone?"

And then the tears came, came pouring out of her red eyes, because "my mother" was suddenly Mommy, was Rebecca Jane Porter, the lady with the flashing smile and the peanut-butter pancakes on Sunday mornings who she'd never, ever, ever see again.

The Kidroid blinked once, twice.

"Then it appears you're too old for me, after all." A tiny crackle. The smell of singed fur. The Kidroid's eyes closed for what Jennifer knew was the last time. She wordlessly scooped up the package and walked to the trash can. ■

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