

Young Writers Award - 2008 Runner Up

My Mechanical Heart by Kathleen Noud

I've always hated the Wizard of Oz.

In the film, the tin man wants a real heart just like everybody else but the wizard gives this crude plastic one that wouldn't sell in a two dollar shop on Valentines Day. It has a clock face embedded in the plastic that ticks 'just like a real one' he says. He clanks excitedly about it, even though deep down, he must know that he's been duped.

Right now, I couldn't be more conspicuous if my fake heart was pinned to my hoodie. The newsagent does a double take when he sees me walking past but the others shoppers just stare. Recycled gossip spreads through the local shops faster than a commodore roars down the street on a Saturday night.

I don't know any of them personally but it doesn't seem to matter. They gape and nudge each other as I walk past, whispering at the top of their voices. I'm craving a custard scroll but the frumpy assistant grabs the shop phone as I reach the bakery and I choke just thinking that I might be busted already.

I wouldn't get worked up about an old movie if I didn't know it was real. See, six months ago I needed a real heart just like the tin man. One that could pump the blood through my body, so I could breath, think, walk, talk. All the normal stuff you wouldn't even think about unless you were crumpled on the damp school oval, with your heart smashing so hard against your ribcage you think it's going to explode.

That's when the Wizard of Oz gave me a mechanical heart. According to my parents, he didn't bother with the smoke and projection screens anymore. He came clean pretty quickly. There was a shortage of donor hearts and I'd have to use the latest generation of the artificial heart until a real one became available.

I change course to the park, rolling up my sleeves, daring the afternoon sun to turn me honey brown but it hides behind patches of fluffy white clouds. Beads of sweat roll down the long scar on my chest and collect inside my cotton bra, making me itch. I lift the bottom of my hoodie and check the battery pack belted to my waist. The green light is stable but I rest on the park bench until I catch my breath.

When my flesh and alloy began to co-operate, I studied a list of 'do nots' bulleted by yellow danger signs with an exclamation mark inside. The things I could still do with my temporary heart were much shorter and easier to remember. Walking, eating in restaurants, fishing, going to the movies, dancing and sex. With a weeping tube poking out of my abdomen and a battery pack permanently strapped to my waist, I'm not likely to be any boy's fantasy. Ever.

School is in and the park is empty except for a mum with two squealing girls begging to be pushed even higher on the swings. The girls are wearing matching denim pinafores and sandals and they look like a miniature version of their freckled, red headed mum.

The mum turns and smiles absently at me. She has soft white skin and blotches of pimples on her cheeks and I realise that she looks about my age. She's probably had to drop out of school like me but at least she has kids and a husband or a boyfriend to keep her going. It's hard to believe that even the teenage mum has a better future than me.

"Hey, you're Kirra right?"

I don't encourage her but she keeps talking anyway, just like my mum does.

"I thought so. How's your heart going?"

Was she talking about my useless fleshy heart or the smooth metal one that ran on batteries?

"Fine."

She tilts her head, "you're young, I'm sure there will be a donor for you soon."

She makes it sound so simple. I can imagine the wizard slicing open my scarred chest and prying apart my ribcage to expose the smooth alloy pump clutching at the ugly enlarged muscle above it. Wheeled in beside me is a middle aged man lost in a coma for three years. Lackeys in white coats keep him on life support while they delicately remove his organs and pack them in ice. He'll be left in peace as soon as I get his beating heart.

She's still giving me the sympathy smile and I give it right back to her.

"Sure, I mean people die every day right?"

Her mouth drops and I walk deeper into the park before she can find something to say. I'd heard enough sentimental bullshit from my own mother.

The wild part is the only area of the park that shows what the suburbs were like before the housing development. Old gum trees tower over wild shrubs and odd spurts of wild grass and flowering weeds sprout from the rich dirt. The water reserve has a sickly copper tone but the dirt banks have the best array of heavy throwing rocks and flighty skimming stones. I flick a small stone onto the water but it sinks without bouncing at all.

I can hear someone laughing behind me. A deep soft chuckle from the other side of the gum tree. I turn to the sound and see the soles of skate shoes poking out from behind a tree. I've never seen anyone else in the wild part of the park. It had always been my place.

I walk over, avoiding the pockets of long itchy grass, until the white skate shoes match up to green combat pants, a black bonds shirt and a handsome face. Shaggy blond hair covers his cool grey eyes. I can't tell if its styled or if he needs a haircut but it suits him all the same. His deep tanned skin and fit arms make me wonder why anyone so beautiful would be hanging out in the park on their own.

"Sorry, you looked like you were trying to kill the fish."

My face burns up and I'm back to staring at his shoes before he can see I'm flushing Barbie pink.

"I used to be good at skimming stones."

He laughs again. I'm staring at the dirt but I'm picturing myself clearer than ever. The way my stomach spills over the top of my jeans, the way the seams clutch at my bum and the way my breasts don't swell no matter how fat I get. I wonder if he can see the black circles around my eyes and how my veins glow blue through my pasty skin.

"Well, you're shit at it now," he smiles.

I smile back but my hand hovers over my battery pack all the same. I want to show him something I'm good at but my mind goes blank.

"I'm Connor."

"Kirra."

"Are you wagging school?"

I look in his eyes for the second time since I've met him. He's friendly but so direct that every question seems a challenge to answer.

"I'm home schooled."

"How's that?"

"It sucks."

Amusement curls on his lips and I feel he understands. He searches the dirt beside him and digs out a flat stone before walking to the edge of the water. The sight of him walking away makes my intestines knot but when he looks at me, I get exactly the same feeling. Home schooling and hospital stints were doing my head in.

"Are you wagging school?"

He glances back and I manage to meet his eyes instead of his shoelaces.

"I finished last year. I'm saving to work in England in a few months."

"Oh."

He looks straight at me and I realise I sound a little too disappointed for someone I've just met.

"I mean, I want to do that too."

Connor turns back to the water, crouches and flicks a stone so it bounces five times before sinking. Satisfied, he picks a few more stones from the dirt at his feet before looking up at me.

"Are you going to have another go or have you embarrassed yourself enough for one day?"

I meet him on the bank and his cologne makes me dizzy as I take a stone from his open palm. He crouches down and I copy him. He holds the stone gently between his thumb and his finger. "So you just curl your wrist back and once you've straightened your arm and your hand in the right direction, you let go. Just watch."

He flicks the stone. It bounces once on the water and sinks.

"Wow, just like that?"

"Shut up." He flicks another stone and it bounces six times on the water's surface before sinking.

He grins, as if his first demonstration had never happened.

"Now you try it."

I take a steady breath and pray that I don't make a fool of myself again. A small voice in me asks if he wants me to be the ditzzy, funny girl but I'd rather match him.

I take a few steps forward. My foot rolls clumsily on the bank and my feet skid out from underneath me. I fall sideways with my feet slipping down off the bank, as I claw madly at the dirt with my fingernails trying to save myself. My tubing gets caught underneath me and my body weight jerks it at shocking angles that make me scream in agony.

I feel Connor's arm crushing around my hips and I anticipate the mass of his body weight as he dives over the top of me but it doesn't come. He's crouching over me, gently pinning me between his knees.

My body's still but my head's spinning out of control. All I can think about is blood. Blood gushing inside of me, blood spurting from my mechanical heart, blood swirling in my head. For the second time this year, I think I'm dying.

"Are you ok?" he asks.

I can't talk and I can't cry. My right hand hovers and fumbles at the zip of my hoodie. Connor's tan looks sallow but he takes the zipper and pulls it all the way down. I can't move my head but the horror on his face tells me more than I want to know.

My battery pack pings its high pitched distress alarm and Connor shudders at the sound.

“At least it’s not broken,” he says.

He’s trying to humour me. I think of smiling but my breath gets caught in my throat and tears spill down into my ears.

I watch him call for help on his mobile as he inspects the damage around my abdomen. The pain and the noise of the alarm drown out what he says even as he looks into my eyes and tries to reassure me. He slowly scoops me into his arms and carries me through the wild and towards the road. I fight off unconsciousness until the ambulance screams louder than the battery pack on my waist.

The anaesthetic frees my mouth before my eyes blink open. I’m telling the nurse that I used to be good at skimming rocks but she doesn’t understand. My mum and dad are leaning over me, gushing and crying until the nurse asks them to give her some room.

Behind them I see Connor, standing at the back of the room with his arms folded and that bemused smile on his face. Something in his arms catches my eye and I squirm to the right to see it.

A squishy toy heart with arms, legs and a smiley face that looks even more ridiculous than a plastic heart clock. I give him my best bemused smile because I think I could be someone’s fantasy after all.