

Futures

Kintsugi for a broken heart

The art of growing up. By Brent Baldwin

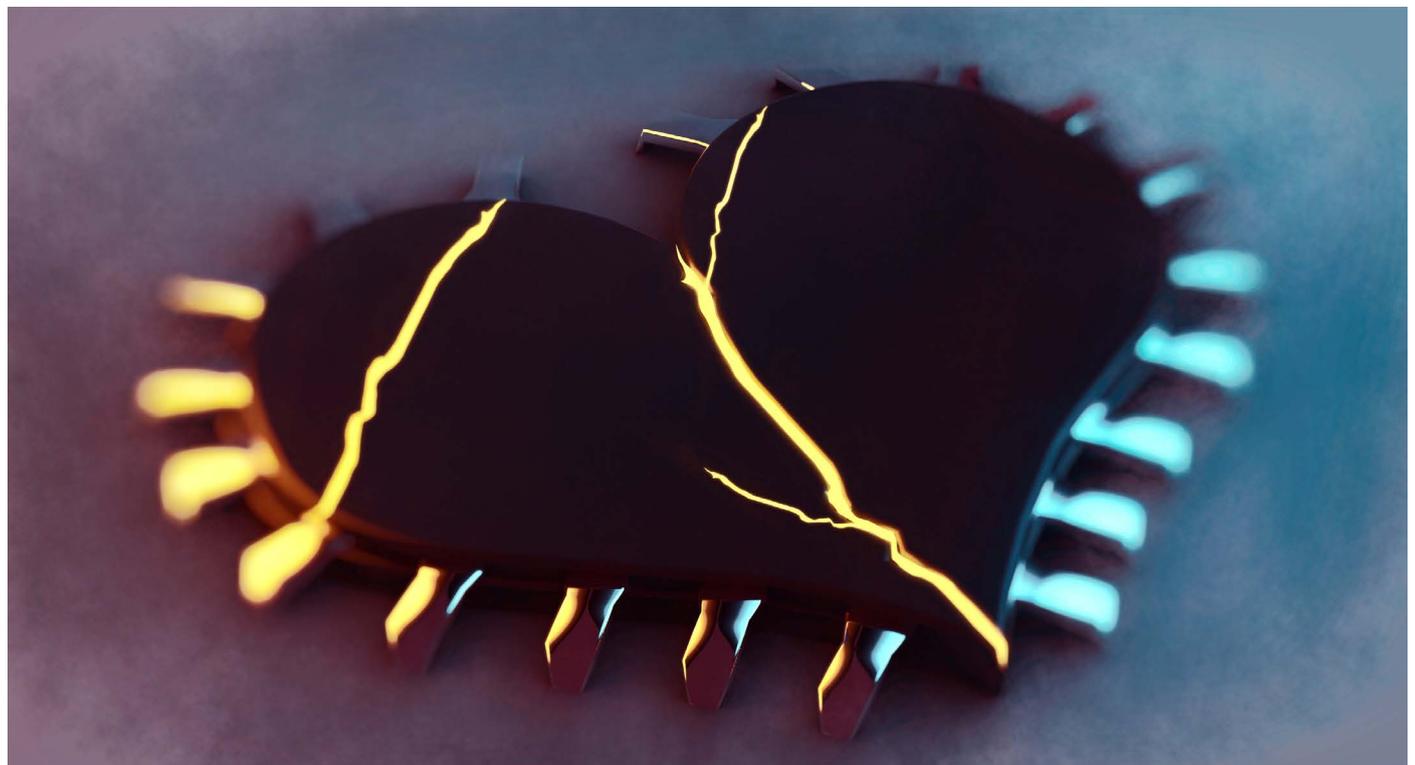


ILLUSTRATION BY JACEY

Spare parts covered the kitchen table. Wires, actuators, titanium ribs. All the things an enterprising dad needed to recondition a model XO3b robodog.

“And you’re sure Fifi will be the same?” Violet asked.

“Not at all.” Tero rummaged through a heap of parts and extracted a circuit board. “Probably not, in fact.”

Violet frowned. Well, it was more of a scowl. She did a lot of scowling these days. Came with the teenage hormones, Tero thought. It felt like only yesterday that she was knee-high, with a mane of curly hair like a mushroom cloud. Fifi had been her eternal shadow, loved more than anyone, including her grandma. Now, Tero barely saw her, and then only when she needed something.

He slotted new memory chips into the circuit board, then slipped the whole assembly into Fifi’s thoracic cage. Violet hadn’t been clear on what, exactly, had happened to Fifi, but the poor creature looked as if it had been fed through a wood chipper and then used as

the demo for a knife infomercial. Or perhaps kicked down the stairs in a fit of misplaced angst.

He threaded a flexible, golden epoxy between the seams in the damaged torso plates. Fifi looked like one of those repaired Japanese vases. Definitely not the stock appearance, but rather fetching, all the same.

Fetching. He smiled at his own joke.

“She doesn’t look like a puppy, any more,” Violet said.

“The manufacturer stopped making parts for this model a few years ago. Fifi is doing some growing up.”

Violet sniffled. Her eyes were red. She had been crying. Again. Something tickled the back of Tero’s brain. Those tears weren’t all for the dog. Fifi had once been the centre of her life, but not since she was about 11. That was four, no, five years ago. Practically a lifetime in teenage years.

“Why did you replace her memory chips?” Violet asked. “Won’t that change her?”

He had hoped she wouldn’t notice the chips.

Foolish of him. She had always been a perceptive child. “I only replaced the damaged chips. Some of her old memories will be there, but we needed to update her operating system to work with her new chassis.” He glanced at his daughter, but she was staring off into space.

“Fifi’s been through a lot. Trauma changes a person. Or a robodog. Makes them grow. Makes them stronger.”

She sniffled again, but didn’t otherwise respond.

Tero worked silently for a few minutes, tightening the leg actuators and checking their range of motion. “Is there anything else you want to talk about? A boy, perhaps?”

Violet’s head jerked up. “No!”

“A girl?”

“NO!”

He wasn’t sure which ‘no’ really meant ‘yes’, but that reaction surely meant that one of them did. He remembered the pain of teenage heartbreak, as if your heart had been crushed beneath a careless boot heel. All part of growing up, despite how terrible it had seemed at

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the time. And where had the time gone? Yesterday a toddler, today nearly a grown woman. It was like you blinked, and a decade slipped past. He had now, at least, this hour with her.

Tero tidied up the extra parts on the table, unwilling to break the spell.

“You see these seams?” He stroked the spider’s web of gold that ran across the repaired chassis. “Fifi will be stronger and more flexible than before. More beautiful, too, if you ask me. And you’re right about her personality changing. It won’t be the same. How could it, after what she’s been through? But she’ll have learnt some important lessons, and she’ll be stronger for them. That’s part of life. You get knocked down, but you get back up and you build something that’s more resilient than what came before.”

Violet didn’t respond, but she was listening.

It was all a father could ask for, really.

“Do you want to tell me what happened to Fifi?” Tero asked, quietly.

“Not really.” Violet inspected her shoes.

“Will it happen again?”

“No,” she said, instantly.

He believed her.

He set the finished dog on the table. There was one last step. “Now, we have a decision to make. Do you want me to set Fifi back to the puppy programming, or should we move her to ‘mature dog?’”

Violet thought it over. “Mature dog. She’s grown up, remember?”

He set the switches for Fifi’s new behaviour and screwed the access panels back into place.

The lights in Fifi’s eyes blinked red, red, red, yellow, green. Sensors scanned their faces, and Fifi’s head turned to the side. Tero knew that

the software was booting and calibrating, but to an outside observer it looked as if the dog was looking at its owners with fondness.

Fifi trotted across the table to Violet and sat in front of her. The dog barked once and nuzzled Violet’s hand.

“What do you think?” Tero asked.

Violet chewed her lip, then lifted her chin. “You’re the best, Dad. She’s perfect.”

Fifi hopped down and followed Violet out the back door, leaving Tero with a table full of parts and a hole in his heart the same size as his daughter.

“You are, too, sweetie.”

Originally from the tree-swept hills of the Missouri Ozarks, **Brent Baldwin** lives in London with his wife, two daughters and terrifying guard cat.

THE STORY BEHIND THE STORY

Brent Baldwin reveals the inspiration behind *Kintsugi for a broken heart*

This story is real. In all the parts that matter. Kintsugi is real. It’s a long-standing art from Japan. A way of taking something that is broken and mending it so that it is even more beautiful than before.

Tero is real. He is me, a father of a very real teenage daughter. Violet is the same age as my daughter. She has Violet’s curly hair — or perhaps I should say that Violet has her curly hair. Violet has the same obsession my daughter had with puppies when she was younger.

The love interest isn’t real, yet. As far as I know. But he — or she — will be real soon enough.

Time is real, and it’s as fleeting as a puppy already halfway out the back door. Teenage daughters make one keenly aware of that.

The only thing more real than dogs are broken hearts. All hearts break, eventually.

I hope this story has reached you when you needed it, dear reader. I hope that your heart might heal a little faster and be even more beautiful than before. Broken hearts do mend. That’s real, too. I promise.

