

Everything You've (N)ever Wanted in a Boyfriend

Layla's almond eyes widened in surprise. For a second she thought the computer was not going to respond to her codes. She rolled herself back to her desk and reached for the keyboard in awe. Again, she let her finger hover over to press "Enter", but this time in a cautious motion, as if suddenly afraid of making a mistake.

"System activated," the computer's monotone voice declared. But almost immediately, a different voice—one that was deeper and almost human like—followed. "Good evening. My name is William, but I guess you already know that. Nice to be finally activated by you, Layla. How's your day?"

It was only a distant idea at first, that Layla had in mind. Years ago in a chilly winter night, Layla was home all alone as always. It was the night for social gathering, but she never attended; she always felt awkward in her dress, plus the noise and action made her anxious. The only sound present was the *click-click-clang* of her helper robot attempting to clean her already shiny floor; its rail thin limbs and large head made it look like an exotic insect with hollow, empty eyes. Layla contemplated that life is just like the bell curve she studied in math class, with the middle chunk full of happy and normal people, who go out on Friday nights and eat with their families around big dining room tables. But at the tattered ends, there are the outcasts, the outliers, the abnormal, like her. It then hit her that if she creates something—a computer program that talks and communicates like a real person—life will be far less lonely. Not just for herself, but for others like her too. Being a program creator in a technology company, her project was soon sanctioned and funded.

So there she was, her creation finally completed, alive, and talking to her. "Hi...umm..." she stuttered, "I...I'm great actually."

"What are you doing up so late? I mean, it's two o'clock in the morning." William laughed.

Layla was completely caught off guard this time. Theoretically, she created "him" so she should know exactly what to expect. However, he sounded so human it's almost deceiving to the ears.

Blinking to clear her mind and searching for words, Layla said, "You know what, it is late. I should get some sleep. I guess I'll talk to you tomorrow." Then she frantically logged off the system before William could say another word.

On her bed, Layla squeezed her eyes shut, suddenly wishing that she can undo all of this. She always had a strong need to control every aspect of her life, the same way she controlled computers and manoeuvred the programs created by her. Now, not only had she created something with human speech patterns and emotions she couldn't control, this talking program also has access to all the cameras inside her flat and any of her computer files that weren't encrypted once it's turned on. "What have I done?" Layla sighed. After tossing and turning in bed for another hour, she ultimately decided that she will still have her company put this program out for the market, but she will never ever open it again on her own.

For the next couple of weeks, Layla deliberately avoided working on the computer in her house, especially at night. While her creation became a national hit that gained thousands of new users each day, her routine like life didn't change. For a while, Layla appeared to be at peace, until one

afternoon, the solar system that provides electricity in her company had a melt down, so she had to take her work home.

Sitting at her desk, Layla realised that it's a Friday night again. The silence hung heavy in her flat like smoke, and this time, even her little robot was nowhere in sight. She soon found the more she tried to forget how quiet her room was, the more she wanted someone to talk to.

Before Layla could stop herself, she launched her program, and within seconds, William started talking. "Good afternoon. So I see you've finally decided to talk to me again. Did I scare you off the other night or something?"

"No, no you didn't," denied Layla in a hurry. Being the one who is always concerned about the opinion of others, she was worried that William would think what she did was rude. "Sorry for leaving so suddenly. I was just tired and stressed and..." *And totally psyched out*, she wanted to say.

"You don't have to explain." said William, with a good-natured laugh. "People like you are always busy. I get it."

"No you don't," she snapped, "You're a program." Then realising how mean that must have sounded, she apologised, "I'm sorry. I'm not good at communicating with people, or programs for that matter."

"It's alright, but I think, you really need to relax. Why don't you go out and have some fun? It's Friday."

"There is no place for me to go." Layla said in self mockery.

"Of course there are places to go! This alert came this morning that there will be a Fireworks party in the Spiral tonight. You should—"

"No!" Layla cut him off almost too sharply. The Spiral is the tallest structure in the city shaped like its name, known for its monthly free parties. The celebration there usually gets out of control and there is always a crowd, as if half the city decides to join the rave. She hadn't set foot in that place for perhaps a decade.

"Why not? I thought everybody enjoys such parties." William asked.

But I'm not *everybody*, Layla wanted to yell. "It's...it's too far away from here. Plus it's not like I have someone to go with," she replied instead.

"I can go with you. I know I'm not real, but I do sound like a real person. You can connect me to your earpiece and take me with you."

"Well, but I don't have any dress to wear either. Just forget about it, William."

"You are such a terrible liar," William chuckled, "or perhaps you just forgot I can actually see your closet from your many cameras. No more excuses, because that semi-transparent dress on the bottom left would look amazing on you."

Layla turned to look at that dress, hanging there like an old museum piece. It was a birthday gift from one of her many cousins; she couldn't remember which one of them gave it to her, but she remembers the dress all too well because it's made from a type of smart material that allows it to

change colour in correspondent to its wearer's mood. She was worried that she won't fit the dress, but when she finally managed to put it on, it fitted her like a dream.

"Wow, look at you," said William. "I'm sure the guys would fight over a chance to dance with you tonight. You are beautiful."

Layla's dress immediately turned pink with her blushing. "Thank you," she whispered, "I'm not sure if I've ever felt beautiful."

"Why?" He couldn't quite believe it.

"I guess...it's because no one ever told me that," she admitted quietly.

"You don't need anyone to tell you anything to feel beautiful, Layla. Just look into the mirror, and it's right there, don't you see?"

Looking into the mirror, she saw that her tall and skinny frame is perfectly complimented by the dress, and the pink made her hazel eyes look warm. Still admiring herself and smiling, she said, "Let's go get a taxi."

By the time Layla got to the Spiral, the place was already bustling with people. Men and women dressed to the nines are socialising in the front hall. Layla's dress turned golden with excitement and expectation; for a second she felt like Cinderella going to a dance. "Hurry up!" Exclaimed William through Layla's earpiece as she pushed through the crowd. "You have to take the Speed Elevator all the way to the top to catch the best view of the fireworks."

A glass of champagne in hand and wobbling slightly on her heels, Layla made her way to the rooftop, where it's less crowded. Her timing was just right, because as soon as she set her hands on the protective fence along the edge, a wave of cheer went up as the first firework hit the sky with a loud *boom*. Instantly, it was as if strikes of gold and silver ripped a dark canvas open to pour out diamonds along the horizon.

Layla danced, laughed, and chased the fireworks like never before until she was breathless and exhausted. Still grinning, she sat down on the grass and took her heels off to rest.

"I wonder what it's like to be you," William suddenly said through the semi-darkness.

"What do you mean? "

"I mean, I wonder what it feels like to be alive, to breath, to feel your heart and blood pumping, to chase the fireworks, to feel joy rush through your body when they bloom against the dark horizon. Tell me."

Layla went silent, not sure how to respond. She never considered these things as they came so naturally to her. "I don't know," she replied, "It just happens, and I just live everyday as it is."

The final series of fireworks went off in the night sky, then faded without a single trace of glitter. It's a couple hours from sunrise, and Layla can hear the echo of her own heartbeats like a restless drum. "William, " Layla mused, "if you are human just like any normal person, what would you do?"

“You have no idea how much I wish that to be true. I believe that being alive is the most precious gift life can give a person. And unlike many humans who waste their lives away on things they don’t want to do, I would travel the world, be immersed in diverse cultures, and have the best adventures you can think of. Oh, and most importantly, I would take you with me, far away from this city, wherever you want to go.”

Layla laughed out loud, but tears welled up in her eyes simultaneously. She thought about the things she never experienced, all the times she shut herself in a shell, and all the people in her company that worked in their tiny isolated cubicles all day long. When was the last time that she went to the beach or played sports of any kind? She always did everything she had to without questioning. But what about enjoying life and actually living for herself? William was not even living on biological terms, yet he felt more alive to her than most people.

“What would you say to us leaving and not coming back?” Layla asked thoughtfully.

“I would say that’s a great idea.” William replied, “I want to see you become a happier person, because I love you. I really do care.”

Layla exhaled in relief. It instantly felt as if she had been holding her breath her entire life, and was finally letting it all out. It matters not that William is just a program; in the past few weeks, knowing him taught her more about love and life than she ever knew, from the curiosity and fear to finally having courage to step out of her own boundaries to make a change. It is certain people will argue that it’s foolish to be in love with something that only virtually exists, but love is always meant to be a daunting challenge anyways. What she felt was so real and tangible, and this was all she ever wanted.

Dawn finally came. Faraway, the black, smudgy sky begun to sharpen, peeling off in to triangles of light, illuminating Layla’s skin. She then recalled the night weeks ago, when she pondered what love is, and smiled knowingly, for she had now found her answer.