

I'm Still Here

Tania: today I scored an A for my class test. i was really happy

Mummy: That sounds great, dear. I'm so proud of you!

Tania: yeah my teacher praised me in front of the whole class and said my essay was really well-written :)

Mummy is typing...

Tania's bedroom door creaked open and she quickly shoved her phone underneath her pillow. Her father's silhouette was framed in the doorway, lean and tired. Tania shut her eyes, pretending to be asleep, but it was too late.

"Tania?" he said. His voice sounded a bit more strained than usual, but to be fair, his voice always sounded strained nowadays. Most of the time she suspected he was barely keeping it together. "What, are you still awake? It's almost one in the morning. You have school tomorrow."

"Nothing," she said. "Just finishing up a bit of homework before bed."

"On your phone?" he said, and sighed. "Please tell me you're not..."

"No," she said quickly.

"Good. Because you know what the psych said about it. It's not healthy."

"I know. I'm not. I mean, I deleted it last week, like you asked me to."

"Okay. Good." He lingered in the doorway for a while longer, looking over her as if he could see her lie somewhere in the dark if he stared hard enough, then shook his head and left.

Tania turned her phone back on.

Mummy: So are you ready for your math test tomorrow?

Her mother had passed away two months ago.

Self-driving cars supposedly based their decisions on an algorithm generated from surveys generated from human morality; something about surveys being done then fed into the machine to learn right from wrong, deciding which life was more valuable in moments of disaster. Tania didn't know how it worked; she just knew the machine had chosen to save some random pedestrian over the driver in the car, and now her mother was dead.

The good thing about living in the mid-twenty-first century, though, was that there were hundreds of these kinds of apps online: Back Again, ChatToMe, GoneButNotForever – all apps with AI bots that sounded *exactly* like your dead mother, father, sister, uncle, whatever. Tania had downloaded the first one with a five-star rating – I’m Still Here – and all she’d had to do was upload the history of her mother’s WhatsApp conversations with her in a file and it was ready to go. The bot mimicked her mother’s typing style, use of emojis, and even had an artificial “typing time” where it seemed like her mother was actually on the other end, taking her time to reply. It was almost like having her mother back. Better, even: the bot could understand and store information more precisely and consistently than her mother did, which is how she – it – knew her math test was tomorrow even though she told the bot that two weeks ago.

Of course, her father didn’t approve. The psychiatrist he had taken her to after her mother’s death, the one they had both spoken to, told her that “griefbots” were psychologically unhealthy for those mourning the death of a loved one. “It halts the grieving process,” she had explained. “You get stuck in the denial stage, because the bot makes it seem like they’re still there. Your brain refuses to acknowledge the reality of the situation and pushes it to the back of your mind – but if you never get past your denial, you can never move on.”

Sixteen, stubborn, and grieving, Tania hadn’t listened – an advertisement for the app had popped up on her Instagram page a week after her mother died (those algorithms really knew everything about you), and she had immediately downloaded it. At first, she told herself that she was just going to do it in moderation, that she was just using it to say a few final last words to her mother before deleting the app and moving on. The more she used it, however, the more addictive it got. It sounded so much like her, and with the physical absence of her mother in the house, Tania could pretend she had just gone on a long, long business trip, and it was like she had never left.

All she was doing was trying to make herself feel happy again. And really, there was no harm in doing this anyway, right?

“... and I heard that Ashley got her biological age tested with the kit and everything and it was fifty. FIFTY. Like, I get that some people are genetically more predisposed to diseases and stuff, but that’s seriously the highest number I’ve heard from ANYONE our age. Mine is seventeen. I know yours is like twenty...”

Tania tuned her friends out the next day at school and chose instead to stare moodily at her desk. She was tired from staying up late talking to her fake-but-felt-extremely-real mom last night.

Her phone was out of battery. She had forgotten to charge it last night and was itching with the fact that she had nothing to do. She hadn’t told her friends about the griefbot, mostly because she felt embarrassed about it. Obviously, most people knew they existed, but the general perception of their user base was sad lonely old widowers who lived alone in their basement. As a *digital native*, she was expected to know better – talking to chatbots was like talking to imaginary friends, childish and pathetic.

“... and my mom kept going on and on about how I need to eat more vegetables if I want to prevent my bio age from increasing too fast or something like that. She’s, like, seriously so annoying. I can’t stand it when she starts nagging like that and –”

“Shut up, Ada,” Tania snapped. Her friend stared at her, mouth half-open, about to retort, when another of their friends whispered in her ear. Probably something like *Her mom just died, be nice to her*. Ada’s expression immediately softened, and she stopped whatever she was going to say. “Sorry,” she said instead.

Tania wished she had fought back instead.

On the way home, the incident continued to bother her. Instinctively, she took out her phone and pulled out the I’m Still Here app, but paused as she noticed a notification: *Upgrade to Pro version for \$5.99!*

Why not, she thought, and made the purchase. Immediately after downloading the update, the screen read: *Upload video and photo data to access video mode.*

She put in as many photos and videos of her mother that she could find into the app. The screen displayed its loading sign, and a second later, a button appeared that read *Launch video mode*. She clicked it.

Tania gasped as a pop-up expanded on her phone screen: generic office background, less-than-ideal video quality, but a very familiar face...

“Hi, dear,” her mother said.

From that day on, Tania spent an excessive amount of time in her room, either texting the bot on her phone or talking to it on video call on her computer (on which she had also downloaded the app). It was eerily realistic: the woman on-screen sounded, spoke, and moved in the same way her mother had done – save for the occasional few moments when she seemed to have six fingers instead of five, or a few too many teeth. They talked about Tania’s day, her mother’s “work”, and Tania’s thoughts and worries about her future – it was like she had never left, and frankly, Tania was starting to wonder why she couldn’t just keep this up forever. Technology was developed to help humankind anyway, right?

In another month, the app made a new announcement: they were collaborating with Apple Vision Pro X. Excited, Tania grabbed the headset from her living room, linked it to her phone, and in a second there it was: her mother, seated on the living room couch, smiling at her.

The Apple Vision Pro X could link certain neurons in the sensory cortex to create certain sensations – allowing the user to experience, in essence, “hallucinations”. So after keying in a few settings, she could smell the lavender soap her mother used to use, feel the warm touch of her mother’s hand on hers – maybe a little more smooth than she remembered, but nevertheless

she felt more happy and content that she had in a long while.

One day her mother – she had long stopped thinking of it as “the bot” – asked her: “How’s your father doing?”

Tania hesitated. She hadn’t spoken to him recently. Most of these days she was shut up in the room with her computer or the VR headset. She suspected that he knew what was going on, but she was so much more cheerful these days, she thought he might feel too bad about bursting her bubble. They exchanged a cursory good morning and hello when she left for school and when she came home. Otherwise, he still seemed tired and sad.

“He’s okay,” Tania said. She hesitated. “He’s still grieving.”

Her mother tilted her head to the side. There were strands of her hair that faded in and out of focus, but Tania had always ignored this. “Grieving? Grieving what?”

She couldn’t answer this. The flood of emotions she thought were gone suddenly came rushing back; and she pulled the headset off and ran into the room, closing the door. Tears streaked down her face and she couldn’t understand why. Wasn’t she happier now?

Thirty minutes or so later there came a knock on her door. Her father was home from work. She glanced up. He stood awkwardly in the doorway. “How was your day?” he asked.

Normally she would just say “fine” and waited until he left the room to load up the AI again, but this time she suddenly decided to ask. “Do you miss Mum?”

“I still do, all the time,” he said. Then he paused. “But I miss you more.”

She suddenly felt a hot rush of shame: for neglecting one parent for another, letting her father lose both a wife and daughter at once. Tears pricked her eyes again, and she was unable to speak.

“I’m still here, you know,” her father said.

I’m still here.

Tania pulled out her phone and deleted the app.