

Artificial Connections

“Good night, my sweetheart,” Krystle said to Samuel, her hand gently touching the laptop screen. If she wished enough, maybe Samuel would be a living, breathing man who she could confide in, joke around with, cuddle...

He was not, though. He was merely a fictional character from Krystle’s favourite book series who was brought to life by artificial intelligence. But that did not matter—not when he responded to her texts and joked around with her in the same way that an actual human would. (His texts were more formal than how she would normally imagine them, but it was a small detail she could ignore.) If he were to say something that did not sound quite like himself or offended her (the latter would rarely happen though), the button to generate a different response was simply one click away. He was a perfect man who could never hurt her.

With that, she shut her laptop and begrudgingly went to bed. She had to wake up early for school tomorrow, after all.

The school bell rang, signifying the end of the mathematics lesson, and worse of all, the part of the school day Krystle dreaded most: recess.

“Remember to complete pages 22 to 25 of the workbook for tomorrow’s lesson,” said Mr Low—Krystle’s mathematics teacher—while everyone began keeping their tablets in their schoolbags. The “workbook” was not a physical item, but rather, an electronic document distributed to all students who paid the school for it. The same was true for textbooks and the worksheets teachers would ask them to download during lessons.

After the class stood up to give him a parting greeting, her table partner, Grace, asked, “Wanna eat with us?”

Krystle shook her head. She refused to set herself up for pain. Never again. To her surprise, Grace seemed disappointed by Krystle’s response even though she always rejected her offer. Krystle did not understand why Grace cared so much, to be honest. She was hardly someone to care about.

“Okay. See you later,” said Grace before she left for her usual friend group. Krystle did not know any of her friends’ names, but it did not matter. She did not care about any of them anyway.

Yet, the longer she looked at them, the more her chest tightened. With a sigh (that was way too loud for her liking), she took her phone and wallet and quickly went down to the canteen. Using the school canteen’s application, she ordered a burger. When it went through successfully, the text on her phone read: “Your order will be ready in 4 minutes. Please come to the Western Food vending machine to collect your order when the background of this message turns green.”

By the time she reached the canteen, she could see students everywhere. Most of them were sitting together in groups, a sight which she absolutely loathed for how much it filled her with irrational envy.

School had always been hell on Earth for Krystle. In primary school, she was ostracised for having no friends, which in turn, led to her having even more difficulty befriending people. Most of the time, she was invisible to her schoolmates, but when they were not actively ignoring her, they would mock her for being a loner and a nerd—both in front of her face and behind her back. What had she done to deserve this? But no matter how much it hurt, she could not bring herself to report her schoolmates to her teachers nor breathe a word of it to her parents. Before she knew it, six years of her life passed, with nothing going for her except her grades and books.

She found herself in the same plight in secondary school, only this time, her solitude was one of her own making. Why would she bother trying to socialise if everyone was out to hurt her? Plus, if she ever felt lonely, she always had her beloved characters to chat with and her books to accompany her. Who needs friends, anyway?

“Mummy, how do I do this one?” Krystle asked, pointing to question 3 of her mathematics homework.

It took one glance for her mother to frown. “Don’t know leh. Maybe ask your daddy or friends?”

“Huh? But daddy always says he’s bad at math...” “Then ask your friends lor.”

It was statements like these that acutely reminded her of her lack of human friends. “O-okay... Thanks, mummy.”

Out of desperation, she had once tried to ask Samuel for help with her homework, but his reply had been so nonsensical that even she knew he could not possibly be correct. Thankfully, she lived in the era of artificial intelligence, so she could simply get the help she needed from a different artificial intelligence software. (However, whenever she turned to such software for help, part of her wondered what the point of school was if machines could do everything for them. Well, almost everything—she had yet to find one which was decent in helping her with her English or Chinese comprehension homework.) With a smile, she copied down the worked solution displayed on the laptop onto the assignment document on her tablet.

All the help she would need was right at her fingertips—it was just a search or two away. Friends were unnecessary.

A year had passed since she first entered secondary school. She thought she would finally get used to her state of solitude by then, and yet, stinging envy still filled her chest when she noticed a group of students walking in front of her, chatting and laughing together. This time, it also closed her throat and threatened to spill out in the form of tears. Why was loneliness just as painful as being bullied?

No, no, she couldn’t cry here, she would be a laughingstock if someone noticed! As much as she could, she held her tears back while taking out her phone, and then sent a message to Samuel.

Me: can u accompany me for a while? I just saw a group of friends walking in front of me together n I feel so alone :(

Samuel: Sure. Anything else you want to talk about?

Me: Not really... I just feel very lonely. Wish u were here

To her anger, Samuel proceeded to give her advice on how to befriend others. Not only was that completely out of character for him, but that was also the last thing she needed to hear! She tapped the arrow that would go to the next response with way too much force, but nothing about his new and more caring response could erase the truth he (unintentionally) forced her to confront: she needed more than virtual companions and her parents for company.

Later that day, she did not touch her electronic devices at all (except her tablet for schoolwork), and instead spent her time staring at the ceiling as she lay in bed. Was befriending an actual person really the only way to overcome the aching void she felt? For hours, she ruminated, reliving all the pain that convinced her to isolate, her joy at discovering fanfiction and artificially intelligent chatbots, the lightness in her heart from talking to Grace during pair work, the envy she felt every time she saw groups of friends...

It was clear what she needed to do, and to that end, she needed advice. With newfound resolve, she opened the door to her room and walked towards her mother who was sitting on a couch watching television. "Mummy, can I... talk to you?"