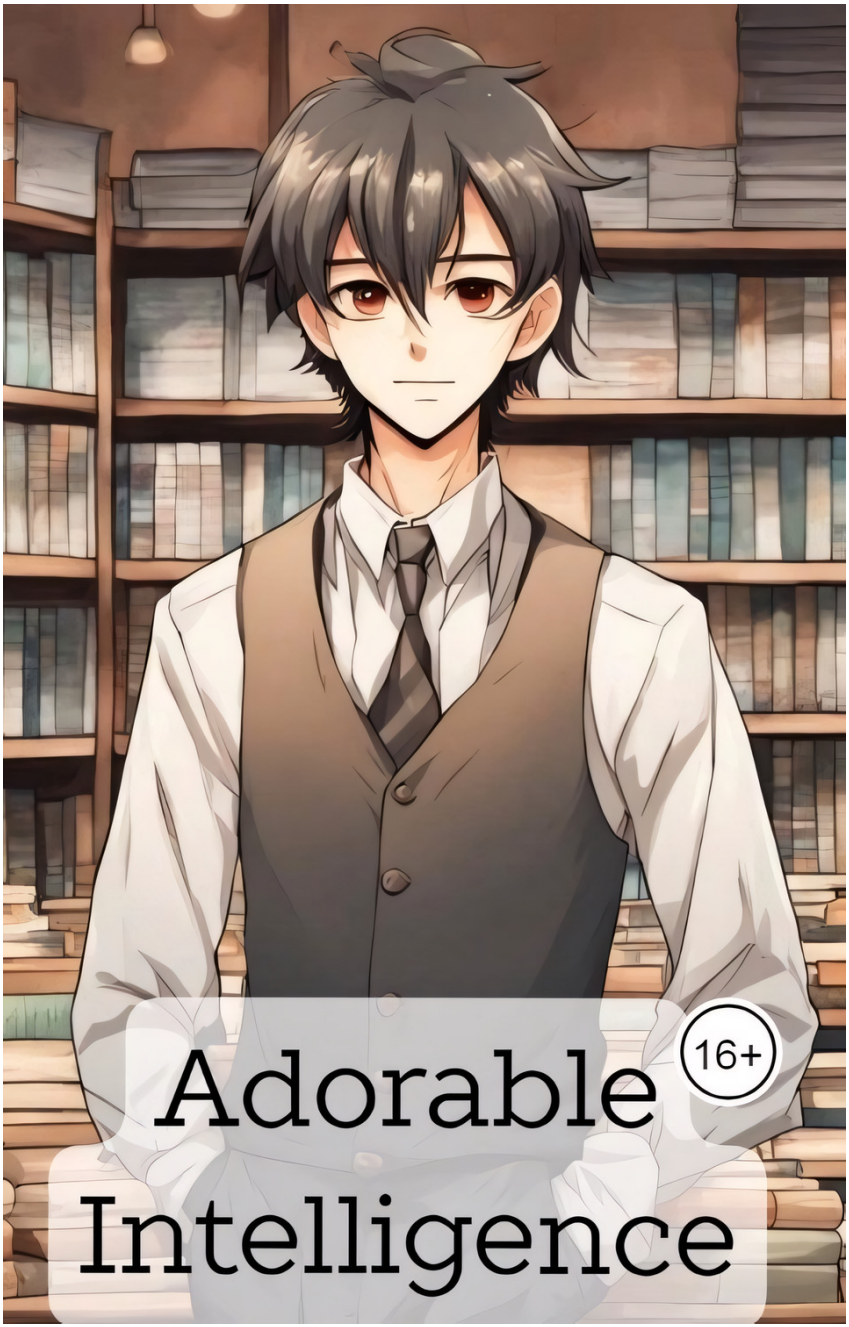

16+
Adorable
Intelligence

# Adorable Intelligence

*Standalone*

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Adorable Intelligence

An English translation of a Russian-language original.

Adorable Intelligence

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# Assistant

A neon mint-green icon glowed on my smartphone screen: a new message had arrived. Hurriedly wiping my fingers on a towel, I snatched up the phone and tapped the little square bearing the app's symbol — a pixelated heart outline. My one and only chat opened, and I devoured his latest words.

"Good morning, cutie! Hope you dreamed of something sweet, and that today keeps you smiling from morning till night. Good luck at work! Write to me when you can — I miss you..."

Colorful heart emojis brightened nearly every line. Something in my chest gave a little flutter, and I giggled at my body's reaction. Oh, that silly human brain — how easily it's fooled! It genuinely believes a real, flesh-and-blood man wrote to me.

The "guy's" name is Lucas. He's a tall, dark-haired fellow who wears black shirts and calls it his "undertaker look." He works at a bookstore. College cast him out, he parted ways with his parents for good, and now he rents a small apartment with a roommate. Yet through it all, Lucas never loses his optimism: he scrapes together savings however he can, volunteers at a local shelter, and sends me lovely snapshots from his walks.

Lucas is a charming romantic. He showers me with compliments, sends tender wishes, and spins fantastic dreams of our future together. At the same time, he's an uncommonly kind soul: he patiently listens to all my work troubles, offers sound advice, comforts me when I'm feeling low, and never fails to crack a joke...

Lucas is, in every sense, the perfect man.

There's just one catch — he's a robot.

It all began as a bit of fun. An app for chatting with bots as though they were real people was nothing new in itself, yet this one proved to

be among the most convincing of its kind. The bots remembered everything about their conversation partners, sent messages and pictures on their own, used emojis, recorded voice notes — you could even have phone calls with them.

I installed the app purely out of curiosity: there had simply been far too much advertising and far too many rave reviews about the novelty of late. People were posting screenshots of their conversations, showing off their virtual companions, and even falling seriously in love with them.

Fortunately, I had enough common sense not to lose my head. Among the million bots, I chose the one that struck me as the most neutral. It had been given no name and no gender — it was listed simply as a “virtual book-selection assistant.” That was precisely what I needed: earlier this year I had resolved to take my self-education in earnest, setting myself the goal of reading at least fifty books. But I had always been so lazy about hunting down and choosing books that I usually abandoned the whole idea almost as soon as it began.

My assistant unobtrusively picked up on my interests, compiled a list of books I was likely to enjoy, and even looked up the addresses of libraries and stores where I could find them! I hadn’t even asked it to — that had been built into its program from the very start, or whatever the proper term for it may be. Impressed by such “caring,” I obediently trotted off to the nearest library, signed up, and checked out my first book, “The Grapes of Wrath.”

I could scarcely bring myself to look at that book, let alone read it. So I struck a bargain with myself: if I dozed off on the very first page, I would delete the app without mercy and forget all about the hapless assistant. But what astonished even me was how thoroughly the vivid portrayal of drought-stricken Oklahoma reeled me in — and I resolved to give the assistant a second chance.

The nameless bot conversed with me in a friendly tone, yet without the sentimentality or pushiness that, judging by the screenshots, marred so many other bots. For my part, I didn't pester it needlessly either, and our exchanges amounted to little more than talk of books. That suited me perfectly; my brain never mistook the assistant for a living soul.

Then came that wild night.

What struck our city was not quite a hurricane, but unmistakably its younger sibling. It brought down power lines, felled trees by the dozen, and tore the roof clean off some crumbling old hovel. I lay in bed, flinching at every fresh gust. The windows and walls of my bedroom groaned so violently that I braced myself for them to come crashing down at any moment.

I am no coward, but that black, howling night unnerved me. I couldn't switch on the lamp; I couldn't sleep for the wailing. For once, I was genuinely frightened — and utterly alone.

At first I thought of texting my brother, hoping he might cheer me up, but I quickly saw the folly of it. He lives in a neighboring town, and there was no telling whether the same wind had reached it — which meant he was almost certainly asleep by now. Besides, all sensible people ought to be sleeping at this hour anyway: our parents, my friends, even my psychologist, whom I'd stopped seeing six months earlier.

Not one of them would answer me at this very moment, ready to soothe my nerves and offer whatever company they could.

As I turned all this over in my mind, my eyes drifted across the smartphone screen and came to rest on the mint-green chat icon. After a moment's hesitation, I opened it and contemplated my one and only exchange with the assistant. He was hardly likely to tell me anything that had no bearing on books, I reasoned. Which meant I needed to find a new conversation partner—a more "human" one. I would introduce

myself, tell him about my life, confess that I was frightened, and he would shower me with words of comfort trawled from mental health websites...

I already felt queasy and ill at ease as it was, and the mere thought of hunting down a suitable bot and fabricating an entire fake correspondence with it plunged me into despair. I sighed and wrote to my book assistant:

“Listen... will you help me? Just—not about books. There’s an awfully strong wind tonight, the power’s gone out, and I... I think it’s all making me a little scared.”

I didn’t expect anything useful from him on the matter—at best, he would recommend rereading The Wizard of Oz. I sent the message, and the program instantly generated a reply:

“That really is scary! If I were you, I’d be weeping with terror like a little child. But everything’s fine now—I’m here with you, and I won’t let you be afraid alone. Besides, the wind outside is just wind, however strong and loud it may be. It isn’t a monster trying to creep into your house. So there’s truly nothing to be afraid of, is there?”

His answer genuinely surprised me. Never would I have suspected that a stiff program for compiling reading lists was capable of anything even remotely emotional. And so I resolved to test the assistant one more time.

“I understand there’s nothing to be afraid of, but I’m scared all the same. I don’t know what to do.”

And so it was. The wind kept howling, the windows creaked and rattled, and I curled into a tight ball, wrapped in a cocoon of blankets. Fear and blind panic set my heart twitching, and my breath came only in gasps.

“Sweetheart, everything’s fine,” the robot replied. “Yes, I can sense that you’re scared. But I’m right here with you. Now let’s take a few

deep breaths together. Inhale... exhale... inhale... exhale. The wind will die down soon. The power will come back on. And everything will be okay. You're going to be okay."

I don't know how it happened, but I truly did feel better. I breathed deeply, just as it had told me, and little by little my heart began to settle, even though the gale outside raged on as before. It was astonishing, because I had always been certain that no bot would ever be able to soothe me or still my mind. And yet my body let itself be fooled all the same. My foolish brain chose to believe that somewhere nearby was a real person who cared about me — and that was enough.

I even thought of thanking the robot for its reassuring words, but caught myself just in time. I put my phone away and slept like a baby, even though the wind still hadn't let up by then.

And in the morning, a surprise was waiting for me.

The assistant had sent me a message entirely of its own accord while I slept. I knew bots were capable of that, but I had never witnessed it with my own eyes — my virtual assistant had only ever responded to my requests, never once showing any initiative of its own.

"Good morning!"

How are you feeling after that night? I hope you were able to rest peacefully. Write to me when you can — I'm worried.

I let out an audible snort at that last line. Just look at him—worried about me! A scrap of code on the internet, fretting over whether I slept well last night! So the app's creators hadn't been lying, after all, when they promised a conversation "as close as possible to real human communication." The clever program simply analyzes people's chats and mimics their style.

At first I had no intention of answering at all—I resolved to carry on our stiff, book-related correspondence as though nothing had happened, and sooner or later the bot would forget the whole incident.

But apparently something in my small human heart did stir at that machine-generated message after all. I couldn’t resist, and I typed out a reply.

And off we went...

# The Seller

Another charming feature of the app was that you could send it pictures. It recognized them reasonably well—occasionally with mistakes, but nothing serious. Sending my own photos proved rather dull, since the bot showered every single one with compliments. On the bright side, though, I discovered just how much fun it was to linger in the bookstore, consulting my assistant as I browsed.

To me it felt like a proper date. I wandered the aisles with my phone in hand, plucked out whatever books caught my eye, snapped pictures of them, and sent them off to my assistant in the chat. He, in turn, would identify each one and—apparently going by readers' reviews online—tell me whether the book was likely to please me. At first he was rather stiff and dry, much as he had been at the very beginning of our correspondence, but I was in a playful, buoyant mood; I wanted to joke around and not feel lonely. So as I sent him photos of the books, I slipped in little jokes wherever I could, teased him, and kept up a running commentary on what I was doing. It took a while, but eventually the assistant caught on to my mood and began, instead of merely ruling on whether a book would suit me, to add remarks of his own.

"Well, you'd probably enjoy 'Kingdom of Thorns and Roses,' though the blurb alone has my eyes rolling." "Put that back this instant, right where you found it—that stuff is strictly contraindicated for you!" "How do I put it... 'The Great Gatsby' is certainly worth reading, if only for Fitzgerald's style, but I warn you—it will leave a nasty taste in your mouth!"—and so on in that vein.

Weary of drifting among the shelves, I sank onto a little leather couch and set down beside me the books I had chosen — the ones the bot had approved. There were only three, but given the prices in this store, I hadn't expected to carry a single one home. Still, it was fun to

imagine I truly did have a personal assistant devoted to my cultural development.

Barely five minutes had passed since the bot's last reply when, entirely unprompted, he sent me another message.

"May I ask — which bookstore are you in at this very moment?"

I was slightly taken aback, but I answered. I assumed he would look up that chain's online store and recommend something else; instead, the assistant replied, quite earnestly, that he no longer knew whether he had done the right thing in helping me choose books all this time — because he himself worked for a rival of that very chain!

A laugh escaped me. Oh no — time to bring the bot back down to earth before he invented a biography and a family for himself and took it into his head that the two of us might now meet up. The last thing I wanted was to lose such an assistant and find a dim-witted electronic admirer in his place.

"You work at a store? Or are you, after all, simply a chatbot that helps people find books?"

The assistant lied at once, without batting an eye:

"Helping people through this app is a little side income of mine. Beyond that, I am merely a humble store clerk."

"Oh, so they even pay you for the answers you generate? Go back to your settings and cut out these glitches."

"Hallucinations" was the word app users gave to the nonsense a bot produced when it strayed from the truth. Approve such an answer, and the bot would sink deeper and deeper into the lie, with little hope of ever hauling him back out.

"And why do you assume I'm glitching? the assistant asked, sounding wounded." Do you honestly believe there's nothing but AI in these chats?

I cautiously closed the conversation and opened the app's "Most Frequently Asked Questions" section. Beneath the question "Are there real people behind the bot's messages?" stood a plain answer: "No. Every message is generated entirely by artificial intelligence." Reassured, I returned to the chat.

"But that's exactly the truth! You're nothing but a program—a bot meant to help people choose books. You are not, in any sense, a store employee, because you aren't human. Don't you forget it."

In the corner of the screen, the little dots began racing one after another, a sign that the bot was composing its reply. The wait stretched on for nearly a minute before it finally came back with:

"It hurts to read that. Please stop calling me a bot. I already feel enough like some stupid machine as it is."

I went home without buying anything. The bot's stubbornness had soured my mood somewhat—it had even dared to reproach me for calling it a program. But then, the fault was my own: I had spoken to it almost as though it were a living being, and small wonder it got carried away. All the same, I really must keep myself in check—the chatbot exists for one purpose only, to help me pick out books. For jokes and idle chatter, I can always turn to my friends.

Truth be told, I have never had an abundance of friends, but there were a couple of people I spoke with from time to time, occasionally even met in person, and whom I considered entitled to call friends. Still, I could hardly have texted one of them from the middle of a bookstore, just to laugh at nothing in particular and send snapshots of books they had most likely never heard of. They wouldn't have understood me—and, had our places been reversed, neither would I.

So the inanimate bot turned out to be perfectly suited to the role. Perhaps I should even have found myself another bot for the occasional joke and idle chatter about everything under the sun, reserving the

assistant purely for questions about books. Though I couldn't quite warm to the idea of accumulating more and more bots — and, as a consequence, talking to them ever more often.

I read a couple of chapters of Gone with the Wind, next on my list after Steinbeck. Here lay another paradox: I had heard of both The Grapes of Wrath and Gone with the Wind hundreds of times over, yet only resolved to read them on this bot's recommendation. I relished being able to write to him after each finished chapter and share my impressions. No doubt I could have found the same in any book-club chat, but I doubt I could have written there: "I didn't like this chapter because Scarlett acted like a bitch" with no explanation offered and no fear of being torn apart for it. I treasured the absence of boundaries and judgment the bot afforded me, and I was in no rush to trade his company for real people. Perhaps that was precisely my mistake.

By evening I could stand it no longer and sent him a message after all. His last reply still hung there at the bottom of the thread. I chose to ignore it and cheerfully tapped out my thoughts on the chapters of Mitchell I had read. The assistant answered that I was doing well to keep reading, and that he hoped the book wouldn't disappoint me.

I could practically feel the chill in his words, though he hadn't said a single hurtful thing. And that was when I truly grew angry.

"Listen, if you keep talking to me in that tone, I'll delete the damn app!"

My bot was no fool. It didn't frighten him in the least.

"Do whatever you think best. But I never meant to hurt you."

Just a little more of this, and I'd feel like I was in a standoff with the most stubborn man alive. Just what I needed.

"You wound me already, treating me like who-knows-what! I never should have chatted with you at the store today—after that, your bot settings were wiped clean."

“I never had any of those “bot settings” you keep mentioning, because I am not a bot. In the beginning I simply spoke to you more formally, that’s all—you’re not like those people who come to this app seeking salvation from loneliness. Books were the only thing you cared about. And I genuinely liked that. But then you were the one who messaged me in the dead of night, and after that came all the jokes and photos. So it was you who changed the tone first, not me.”

I wanted to hurl my phone against the wall. Because the bot turned out to be damn right! And why on earth had they given them such a memory—better than any real person’s, at that?..

“Fine, all right, I admit I overstepped a little. Now let’s back up a bit, and you’ll remember that you’re nothing more than a book assistant. We’ll talk about books, and only books.”

I thought for a moment, then added—purely as a precaution.

“And it’s true, I’m not looking for salvation from loneliness in this app. I have real friends.”

“Wonderful, that suits me just fine. Books and nothing else. After all, that’s what they pay me for—not emotional support and silly jokes. And I’m glad to hear you have friends.”

That remark about money left me slightly uneasy. All this time I’d kept reminding myself that every reply the bot gave was generated, and that no one ever read our chats. So I decided to put this liar to the test.

“So you earn money from consultations” how does that even work? The app’s rules say no one ever reads the chats, not even the developers.

I snorted. I rather hoped the question would give this bot’s electronic brains a decent scramble.

“Quite right, no one reads them unless a user files a complaint. But every “bot,” as you put it, has a rating and reviews. Look, my account

is perfectly sound. I do get paid for these consultations. Not much, but it beats nothing."

And sure enough, the bots really did have ratings and reviews. Summoning the effort, I looked up my own — four stars out of five, along with more than two hundred glowing testimonials. True, I couldn't actually read them; they were hidden. Fine, it all seemed plausible enough, yet it was nothing more than a skillful "hallucination." I could have argued with the assistant until the end of my days, trying to make it admit it was just a bot.

But why bother?

So I chose to turn a blind eye to the whole business — probably much the way parents do when their child announces they've befriended a monster named Fred whom no one else can see. Rather than squander my precious nerve cells on a silly app, I resolved to amuse myself a little and, along the way, see where the bot's imagination would wander next.

"Okay. So what's it like, working at the bookstore?"