

## Winning Short Story

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continued from page 1

highway.

A coziness sank into the car as Sophie felt the success of her escape. She grinned to herself. And so did the man in the rear view mirror.

"Oh my God!" Sophie cried. "Not again! Please! It's not fair!" Sophie began to cry so hard she couldn't see the road. She pulled over, parked and cried into her hands. "Why are you chasing me?" she blubbered. "What have I done? I don't even know you! WHO ARE YOU!" she screamed at the rear view.

The grinning man stopped grinning. He was rather on the spot.

"Do you have a kleenex or something?" Sophie asked as she used her sleeve.

Looking a little confused, the man got out of the car.

"No wait! Don't go!" Sophie whimpered. She got out after him. "Wait!"

The man waited.

"Who are you?" Sophie asked again.

A wind began to blow.

"I just want to know who you are," she tried. "Why would you want to kill me? What did I do?"

The man began to sway.

"Are you alright?"

The man fell off his feet and crumbled into bits. Parts of him blew away in the breeze.

Sophie felt guilty. "Oh look, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to be rude. Please Mister, don't blow away like that."

But he just kept blowing away.

"Tell you what," Sophie suggested. "Let's meet again sometime. Somewhere nice, with sunlight and plants. How about a little cafe, I know just the place, where we can talk. I'd really like to talk to you. What do you say?"

But the man just lay in a pile of bits.

"Well, you think about it, okay?"

The cafe was comfortably crowded. Lots of people, lots of plants, not a lot of room for a nightmare. Maybe he won't show. He doesn't even belong here, she thought as she looked around at the chattering cheeriness.

A shadow appeared. Sophie blinked into it. It was him. He looked shy and hidden in his coat and hat. He said nothing.

"You're here!" Sophie offered a nervous smile and a chair.

He remained standing.

"Please, sit. It's okay. I just want to talk."

Slowly, he sat.

"I'm really glad you came. I wasn't sure if you'd dare."

No response.

"Can you speak?"

He nodded.

"English?"

"Yes," he whispered.

"Wonderful!" Sophie brightened. "So who are you?"

The man shook his head.

"What do you mean 'No'? Who are you?"

"You don't know me," he whispered.

"I know I don't know you. That's what doesn't make sense. I'm being chased by some kind of thing when the stupidity suddenly occurs to me, I don't even know you. Who are you?"

"I'm dead," he gurgled.

"Oh that's awful!"

"I'm dead."

"Okay, okay, you're dead. I still don't know who you are."

"It isn't important," he mumbled.

"What? Don't be silly!" Sophie cooed as she reached out and lightly patted his arm. "Are you saying you're not important? Of course you—" Sophie recoiled at the feel of his arm. It felt stiff and not very warm. Remembering her manners, she tried to look unaffected. "Everyone is important," she continued.

"Perhaps."

"Are you symbolic? Maybe that's it. You're supposed to be symbolic, right?"

No response.

"Am I right?" Sophie asked, feeling she ought to win a prize if she were.

The man shuffled his feet impatiently under the table and sighed heavily. He pulled a handkerchief out of his pocket and blew his nose. "Let's forget it," he said, but in a different voice. And then he sneezed.

Sophie sat back preparing to become confused. "Forget what?"

"Let's just junk this whole thing. It's been a total bust anyway." He then removed his hat



*The man fell off his feet and crumbled into bits. Parts of him blew away in the breeze.*

and began to unbutton his coat.

Sophie was not confused.

"Garth Hammond," he said as he stuck out one of his pale grey hands. They shook and this time Sophie could feel his numb flesh, cold and malleable like mud.

"How do you do," Sophie said, looking like she had an ugly taste in her mouth.

Now that Garth had taken off his hat and coat, Sophie could see that he was actually quite a young man. "That's amazing!" she sang. "You look so different suddenly!"

"Trick of the trade," he shrugged. "Make-up helps." Garth wiped his face with a napkin, taking off years of wrinkles and scars.

"You're wearing make-up?" Sophie leaned closer.

"Well, I like to be convincing."

"Convincing?"

Garth leaned back and waited for her next question.

"What are you?" she asked right on cue.

"I," said Garth, "am an actor."

"An—"

"An actor. Been one all my life. Played all the parts, all the plays, caught a bad cold a while back and died, but that didn't stop me."

"It didn't?"

"Hell no! I'll always be an actor!"

Sophie was still fogged in confusion. "But you're dead," she murmured. "How can you still—"

"Dead," he quickly interrupted her, "is a pejorative term around here. But you're quite right, I am. As a matter of fact, I died in my sleep dreaming of fame—"

"Dreaming?"

"of fame and glory and—"

"And you never woke up?"

"Never did."

Sophie didn't like it. Something was wrong. She sat up straight and gripped the edge of the table, preparing to run off if need be, when a waitress approached the table.

"Are you ready to order?" she asked.

Sophie turned quickly to the waitress and began to study her up and down. She was

young and looked much the same as any waitress with a mindful of food items, table numbers and other trivial thoughts of the day. Oh, but so young and... and what? Sophie thought. She reached out and touched the waitress' arm with a quivering, curious finger. The waitress stepped back with a What's-the-matter-with-you expression on her face, all the while retaining the diplomacy required when dealing with what the community referred to as "slumberheads".

"Are you dead too?" Sophie asked, forgetting her manners entirely.

"Yes ma'am. Now, what can I get you?"

Sophie looked around at the very distinct and different faces of the surrounding crowd. A rush of blood began to panic through her veins as she swung back to face Garth. He looked back at her blankly, but Sophie thought she caught a slight wince in his eyes. "Mr. Hammond?"

He said nothing.

Nothing was alright anymore.

"Mr. Hammond, I don't get it. Have I got a bunch of dead people running around in my head or what?"

Garth quickly sat up and cleared his throat. "Uh, we're not quite ready to order yet," he said to the waitress. "Why don't you give us a minute."

"My pleasure," the waitress smiled harshly and stamped off muttering nasty words under her breath.

Garth leaned over to Sophie. "Don't say 'Dead People'."

"Well, I—I'm sorry, but this whole idea is giving me the creeps. Tell me you're only dreaming."

"Well...I am, in a sense."

"Wait a minute," Sophie shook her head. "What makes you think you're dead just because you never woke up? Maybe this is one of those dreams that drag on for hours and really seem like years. Maybe you'll wake up tomorrow or next week or in a minute."

"Or maybe I'll get hit by a bus? Look,

forget the maybes. I've already thought about that stuff, and I'll tell you, I was pretty confused for a while until I discovered the one thing that convinced me of my true state."

"What was that?"

"My name in the classified ads under Birth Announcements."

"Oh," Sophie cooed softly. "Congratulations. I mean, I'm so sorry. No, I don't mean that either," she groaned, holding her head from its spinning cycle of thoughts. "My head hurts."

"Well, I'm not surprised if you're going to fling around so many questions."

"They didn't help. I still don't know what's going on."

"Are you saying you don't believe me?" Garth asked stiffly.

"No, no. I'm just saying that, well, that uh—"

"You don't believe me."

"No! I believe you enough. I'm just not so sure about the classified ads."

"I'm not lying!"

"Ssh! Oh please, Mr. Hammond, don't get upset. Just tell me how you know the ad isn't part of your dream."

"Whose dream?"

"Yours!" Sophie yelled in the effort to make herself understood. "Yours?!" She corrected herself. "What am I saying?"

Meanwhile Mr. Hammond's eyes had widened considerably. He snapped his fingers. "Yeah! I never thought of that. That's a good point."

Sophie's eyes widened with her own reaction. "No. No, forget what I just said. It doesn't make any sense."

"Do you know what this could mean?" Garth said, deaf to Sophie's opinion. "I could still very well be alive!" He rose from the table in a fit of jubilation and stood up on his chair. "ALIVE!" he shouted with open arms.

The cafe crowd turned their heads and looked at Garth with complaints and whispers while the waitress ran to get the host who approached with caution.

"I'm afraid I must ask you to leave Sir, since we have every right to refuse service to slumberheads at any time and since you seem to have chosen the moment yourself."

Suddenly, Sophie shot out of her chair and grabbed for the host's attention. "He's not the real slumberhead! I am! I'm the one you want to throw out. Me! Not him!"

"What do you mean?" Garth said. "You don't know that."

"Yes I do!" she tried to scream, but her words were strained with panic.

"No you don't!" Garth bantered with determination.

"Yes I do," she whimpered.

"No you don't!"

"Stop it! Stop saying that! You're mean!"

"Now look," said the host. "One of you has to leave. So who's it going to be?"

Sophie had crumpled onto the floor while Garth remained on his chair. He looked down at her folded body as he dropped his arms to the side. "Don't cry," he said gently. He stepped off the chair and knelt down beside her. "Don't cry," he whispered in her ear. "It's only a dream."

Sophie looked up at him, her eyes blurred and shining from tears.

The host bent down to the two of them. "Who's it going to be, folks?"

Garth frowned and looked at the floor. Sophie didn't know where to look and started sniffing.

"Do you have a kleenex or something?" she asked Garth.

He looked up at her and touched one of her tears. "You slumberheads never come prepared, do you?"

"What was that?" the host asked with a butting ear. "Okay little lady," he yanked her off the floor. "Let's go. Rules are rules." He pulled her towards the exit while she struggled to face Garth.

"I hope I haven't embarrassed you!" she shouted as the distance between them grew.

"Not all all," Garth said quietly. "I enjoyed the company."

"Will I ever see you again, Mr. Hammond?"

"Please," he yelled through cupped hands, "call me Garth! And I honestly don't know!"

Sophie was gone. Garth sat back down at his table, his eyes locked in the direction she had left. A soft wind curled around his body, pulling and tugging at him greedily. Bits and pieces flew off in squalls. He tapped his fingers and waited.