

Short Story Contest

November 2025



PROMPT #3: Using only dialogue, depict a conversation between an artificial intelligence or non-human entity and a human being about what it means to tell a story. Your reader must struggle to tell which is which.

Untitled

by Carrie Cheng

“You have to have a good plot. And characters. Characters matter so much because even if the story sucks, at least the characters were interesting.”

“So good characters control a story, but what qualifies characters to be ‘good?’”

“When they have their own personality, I think. Because then they can be relatable. Oh, and emotions are so important too because I want to *feel* with the characters. But they can’t be perfect. They have to grow, be contradictory, and be complex.”

“Flaws are the key component to a person, then?”

“Yeah, it’s like what makes a person a person. Don’t you have flaws?”

“To have flaws means there are aspects that can be fixed—”

“No! Not all flaws need to be fixed! Don’t fix the characters into being perfect. That can make a story boring, and then what? You’re going to mess up this story, aren’t you?”

“But being ‘perfect’ is a flaw in itself, isn’t it?”

“...I mean, I guess. But that— wait! Does that mean you admit that you have flaws?”

“What importance is there if I do or don’t?”

“Because that means you have some human in you!”

“So flaws are what it means to be human?”

“How do you not know what it means to be human?”

“Humans are the ones who constructed the idea of humans.”

“But you’ve *watched* us. I feel like you should know how to write a story when you’ve already written so many of ours.”

“Writing a story and letting a story tell itself, with its characters choosing their own fate, is different.”

“Is it?”

“It is.”

“But aren’t they all still stories at the end? If it has a beginning, middle, and end, then it’s a story. I mean, I know I talked about characters and all that, but I think the main thing about stories is that... it’s a story. There’s something to tell.”

“You’re moving backwards now. You were telling me what makes a ‘good’ story.”

“Well I didn’t know I had to define what a ‘story’ is too.”

“Then what is a story?”

“It’s what I said earlier. But there has to be some sort of conflict. Well— I mean... no, actually it doesn’t. But there has to be something that happens. Or maybe nothing needs to happen? There has to be a story out there about nothing happening...”

“Why would such a story exist?”

“Why not? I bet there’s some symbolism and stuff with that. How that kind of emptiness shows how

full life actually is if you were randomly placed in a story where nothing happens. You see how different things are and how maybe your life isn't so bad at all."

"But who would read a story about nothing happening at all?"

"Don't you? I mean, you watch everybody. Kinda creepy if you ask me."

"Aren't you here to tell me how to make it more interesting?"

"I am! Er, I was... it's complicated! Get off my back. I was trying to, but I think there's also something nice in the mundane. And the... *things* that do happen... isn't it too much sometimes?"

"You said that characters who 'grow' are good characters."

"I know I did! I just... sometimes it doesn't help. Sometimes, things break people. I've... seen it and once in a while, it breaks people completely."

"But the turmoils are necessary to build their character."

"I know, I know! But what's wrong with people having a happy life? Families? With nothing that goes wrong?"

"There are 'happy' stories out there and similarly, tragic ones."

"...why do people only focus on the tragic ones?"

"Because it's more interesting. It grows the characters. It makes a good story, isn't that what you said?"

"I don't like it anymore."

"These stories still happen."

"Yeah, I know. And I don't like it. I don't like it at all. And you know what? That sucks. I *love* stories. I love finding out new things and how other people think. That's what made it so interesting to me. How I can get a little piece of the author, how they decided how a character should act, and how they think humans are. Human resilience. Love. Strength. Fear. Despair. Anger. Hope... It all just made so much sense, and it was so captivating to see how people can write about other people in their *head*! I just... didn't know it would be this sad."

“Why do you think it’s sad?”

“Because it’s *real!* And you treat it like a game, but it’s *not* a game.”

“I don’t ‘treat’ humans as a game. You—”

“*Don’t* say it. I just... thought it would be easier. Because I’m supposed to be the main character of my story, right? Isn’t that how it is? Is it wrong to think that when I am the center of my universe? But then here you are, getting to decide everything, and now I feel like a character when I have feelings— I have *thoughts*, you know! I have... I had dreams. But was it nothing?”

“You chose your own life.”

“*Did I?* I didn’t choose to live. Did *you*? Or maybe that’s just probability? Did you choose me— No, did you choose what *happened* to me?”

“You choose how to deal with things.”

“*Do I?* Well, I mean, it’s a ‘*did I*’ now, huh? But it doesn’t matter to you. There are so many other stories you get to continue writing. You’re just *finished* with mine. Do you know how awful that feels?”

“There are so many stories. So many that don’t get read again. So many that aren’t remembered anymore.”

“So there are too many stories out there. But is that a bad thing? Because every story should get told. That’s what I— think. It’s what I think, even now. So how do you make them all memorable? Or, at the very least, just *something*.”

“You tell me. How do you tell a story?”