

A-to-Z Blogging Challenge
2013
Flash Fiction

by Colin D. Smith

INTRODUCTION

Established in 2010 by Arlee Bird, the April A-to-Z Blogging Challenge is a blog hop in which participants have to write a blog article each day for every day in the month of April, except Sundays. The first blog article must in some way be connected to the letter “A”, the second must be to do with the letter “B”, the third, “C”, and so on. Each blog article should be at least 100 words long, but other than that, participants are free to write whatever they choose.

I first took part in 2012 and enjoyed it so much, I decided to do it again for 2013. Last year, I added to the challenge by writing a piece of letter-themed fiction every Monday. For the 2013 challenge, I further added the restriction that the fiction had to be 500 words or fewer in length. So each piece of fiction is truly flash fiction.

I don't claim that each story is a masterpiece, or that it's even the very best writing I've ever done. However, I am pleased with how they turned out. Flash fiction isn't easy to write well. The idea is to tell a complete story in as few words as possible. This means you have to introduce characters, set up a plot, and give the piece some kind of direction. Obviously, there's no room to do any deep character analysis, or world-building. Indeed, the trick to writing flash fiction is to imply as much as you say. It's also quite permissible to hint at back story and allow the reader to fill in the blanks. A classic example of flash fiction is credited to Hemmingway, and is 6 words long: “For sale, baby shoes, never worn.”

One of the things I enjoy about writing flash fiction, aside from the editing practice, is that it gives me the opportunity to explore different genres and styles without committing to an entire novel. Within this collection we have a piece of historical fiction/fantasy (“Gambit”), a thriller (“Strike”), a pirate story (“X Marks the Spot”), and an experiment in second person voice (“YouTube”).

I hope you enjoy reading these as much as I enjoyed writing them.

CDS, May 2013

ALIEN

The man behind the desk stared at Anthony. His brow creased, his eyes moved slowly, analyzing every facial tick, every nervous glance, each drop of sweat. Watching; observing; mentally cataloging.

Anthony tried to appear calm. He kept his clammy hands folded together in his lap, out of his inquisitor's field of vision. The silence seemed to drag. Did he have something on his face? Was the man behind the desk using body language Anthony didn't know? Or maybe he forgot how to speak. Or maybe he was speaking very quietly, and Anthony couldn't hear. Maybe those silent words, those gestures, were supposed to tell Anthony what to do, what to say. But Anthony didn't understand, and that would mean failure. He could feel the sweat on his neck.

"So, Mr. Anderson," the man said without relaxing his eyes, or changing his posture, "I see from your file you passed the first phase, and scored reasonably well." He didn't look at the file open on his desk; he held Anthony's eyes in his visual tractor beam. Anthony tried a smile. It wasn't working so he stopped.

"And now the Final Test."

Anthony swallowed.

"Are you prepared for the Final Test, Mr. Anderson?"

The man's tone wasn't clear. Anthony had studied, so, yes, he was prepared. But maybe he wasn't supposed to say yes. Maybe that was the wrong answer. The man's right eye twitched slightly. A sign? A hint?

"Um... yes," said Anthony.

"Are you sure?" said the man.

A smile. Kind? Malicious? Goaded? Pitying? Mocking?

"Well... that is to say..."

"Did you want a moment to relax before we begin, Mr. Anderson. You do look a little... nervous."

The man's eyes were still locked on Anthony. For the last five minutes he hadn't even blinked. Anthony realized he was rubbing his hands together. He stopped. His foot started shaking.

"I'm—I'm fine, really," Anthony said.

"In that case," said the man, shifting back in his chair and picking up a piece of paper from his desk, still watching Anthony, "we'll begin."

Anthony took a deep breath. He closed his eyes and thought happy thoughts. Home. His wife preparing his favorite meal. The dog snuggling next to his feet while he watches "NCIS" on television...

“Mr. Anderson?”

Anthony smiled. It was almost genuine.

“Sorry, I’m ready.”

The man glanced down at the sheet of paper in his hand.

“Mr. Anderson, please name the three branches of government.”

GAMBIT

Gladfel watched as three hundred pounds of muscle tromped into the middle of the open field. The warrior's sword was large and heavy; he held it like a bamboo stick.

"Your majesty, let it be me." Ared was young and powerful. Maybe not three hundred pounds, but more than a match for the man. Gladfel smiled.

"Not yet, my boy."

"I don't understand, my lord. You must defeat Karrag's champion to win his land. You only have three attempts. I can do it!" Gladfel put a hand on Ared's shoulder.

"This is why you are the warrior, and I am the tactician," he said. "I'm sending in Pokel."

"Pokel?" Ared glared at his king. "With respect, my lord—are you mad? Karrag's champion will destroy him!"

There was a loud, impatient grunt from the field.

"I'm afraid you are probably correct, Ared. But that will make Karrag think he has beaten our champion. Karrag's champion will think our next challenger is not as good, and he will not fight as well. You will do away with this man, and the next two, without losing your breath."

"Too bad for Pokel," said Ared.

"Indeed," said Gladfel. "But his is a noble sacrifice for the greater victory."

Another, louder grunt came from the field. Gladfel summoned Pokel forward. Pokel emerged from the nearby tent. Though well-built, he was half the size of Karrag's champion. His veins didn't protrude, and his sword was obviously heavy in his hand. He stepped forward with poker face to confront his adversary.

Gladfel hid his eyes when the first swing of the blade came down on Pokel. There was a loud clang. To Gladfel's astonishment, Pokel blocked the strike and managed to swing his sword close to the man's unarmored abdomen. The man dodged and tried another blow which connected with the plating on Pokel's back. The force sent Pokel to the ground, but he recovered and was soon standing again. Pokel tried some jabs to the man's arm, but the man was too quick, and Pokel only just avoided a counter-blow to his chest. Pokel threw his weight behind a swipe to the man's head. But the man exploited Pokel's exposed stomach. The slash almost severed Pokel in half. He crumpled to the ground in a mess of blood and entrails.

Moments later, Karrag crossed the field and approached Gladfel.

"Ha ha!" he cried out. "Your man fought bravely. But he was no match for mine. Are you ready to admit defeat?" Gladfel looked concerned. But then broke into a grin. "What is so funny? Your champion is dead. Surely you're not going to continue?"

"Oh, Karrag!" Gladfel said. "Of course I will continue. You see, that was not my

champion.” Karrag looked concerned. But then broke into a grin.

“I see we think alike,” he said. He pointed to the man wiping his blood-soaked sword on his tunic. “Borak is not my champion either.”

MAGICIAN

Tap. Tap. Tap.

Matt shot up in his bed. The cloaked figure sat at his desk, tapping his fingertips on the surface. Matt's heart started to pound.

"So glad you could join us, Matthew," said the man, his voice barely above a whisper.

Matt slid from the bed.

"Come, Matthew," said the man.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

Matt's feet caught the rhythm. He stumbled over himself to get to the desk. Reluctantly, he took the chair opposite the man. Matt was half blinded by the desk lamp pointed toward his face.

"Do you like your dwelling?" the man said.

Matt was silent.

"Well?"

Matt nodded.

"And your vehicle? What is it you call it, Matthew? A B.M.W.? That was what you requested, correct?"

Matt nodded.

"Do you like being a 'corporate executive'?" the man said. "You are paid much currency for minimum effort, I understand. Is that not what you wanted?"

Matt managed a "yes."

"And the females you wanted," the man continued. "They satisfy you?"

Melissa. Beautiful, blonde Melissa. She was still asleep in Matt's bed.

"Y-yes, yes," said Matt.

"You know the deal, Matthew," said the man. He lifted his right hand; three cards appeared. He laid them face down in front of Matt. "This is your last chance. The best of three, you said. This is three."

Matt felt his throat tighten.

"How-?"

"Simple," said the man. "I will remove your heart. Quickly. You won't feel it."

"Why?" said Matt. Tears trickled down his cheeks.

"That was the deal. You get your heart's desire. I get your heart. It's time to make

good. But I am generous; I give you this chance to escape. Just locate the card I name.”

The man’s hand hovered over the cards.

“But I will allow one last request. A cigarette? Intimacy with the female?” He was toying with him.

Then Matt remembered something Melissa said, half-mumbled as she drifted off to sleep. It made as little sense then as it did now, but he suddenly felt compelled to repeat it.

“I want the card I choose,” said Matt.

The man shifted his body. Matt flinched, expecting a hand to shoot out toward his chest.

The man reached over. Matt pushed back into his chair.

The hand fell upon the cards.

“One of these cards,” said the man, moving them around, “is the King of Diamonds. Select it, and you live.” He pushed the cards toward Matt.

Matt gazed at the cards. They all had the same unmarked red back. His tears flowed freely as he placed a shaking finger on the middle card.

Matt fell from the chair.

“Matt? Are you okay?”

Heaven? Hell? Matt slowly opened his eyes. Daylight lit the room.

“Matt! What happened?” Melissa knelt beside him, stroking his face.

Matt started to move his hand and felt something with edges digging into his palm. He held up a red card.

He turned it over.

The Ace of Hearts.

But the picture in the middle was missing.

STRIKE

The strike will be a complete surprise. The victim will never see it coming.

I've been living by those words for the last 48 hours. Walking through town with my coat collar pulled up around my neck and my bag across my shoulder, I'm hyper-alert. Old lady with a large shopping bag; goth hanging on a street corner, hands in pockets. I breathe heavily, walk quickly—but not too quickly.

A dark alley. I need a moment's concealment to think. I thought I knew this city, but I'm blanking out on the best places for cover. I hear a rattle and my heart jumps. I turn. A cat walking on some old pipes. Relief. This is a new experience for me, and I need to stay cool. I must be aware of my surroundings, of everyone around me, but I can't be jumping at every noise. They could be here; and they'll most likely be hiding in shadows too.

I start walking the length of the alley. Aside from the pipes and some rain-soaked boxes, the place is deserted. The noise of traffic echoes from either side. I'm looking ahead, scoping out windows and ledges until I reach the opposite side. That's when I see the man in the black leather jacket smoking a cigarette. He's on the other side of the street, and as soon as I come out from the alley, he turns and walks the same way. I've been made. I have to move quickly.

The man's good. He manages to look inconspicuous, though I know he's following me. I pick up my pace a little; he does the same. I maneuver myself between people, but he's still close on my tail. From the corner of my eye I see a taxi approach; I hail it. The driver pulls over and I get inside. The cab smells of stale orange. The driver just nods when I direct him. I watch his eyes in the rear view mirror as he pulls away. He glances back at me.

The strike will be a complete surprise.

I watch the wing mirror, but I can't tell if black-jacket man is following. The ride only takes ten minutes, so I'll know soon enough if he's tailing. He must have seen me, but perhaps he couldn't get a cab. I try to look relaxed, even try some small talk with the broody cab driver. He just grunts and nods.

We stop at the park. I pay the fare; the cabbie grunts and drives away. There aren't many people around, which is good. I soon find the restrooms. A few minutes later, I walk out of the men's in a park keeper's uniform.

Moments later, black-jacket man walks past me. There's no-one else around.

The victim will never see it coming.

I pull my revolver, attach the silencer, and pop a bullet in his head.

From the empty men's room I make the call.

“Target eliminated.”

X MARKS THE SPOT

My heart near about leaped from my chest when I saw it. I collapsed my telescope and called to the First Mate.

“Billy,” I said, “straight ahead. Keep her straight!”

“Aye sir,” he called back.

The Mutiny may be a rickety pile of wood, but she’s done me proud these past five years since I’ve been captain. She fairly clips along when the wind’s billowing in the sails, and she was doing a fine job cutting through the water as we approached the island. I pulled out the map we’d been following for six months now. Everything looked just as it said.

We hit land maybe thirty minutes later, and all but a few watchmen disembarked, with five of the burliest men carrying shovels.

“Where now, sir?” said Billy. I consulted the map, and noted the landmarks. Five trees in a circle, and a big cross in the middle: “X” marks the spot.

“Follow me,” I said, and led the march across the sand into the woods. It was maybe only ten minutes of walking before we were standing in the middle of five big palm trees. I checked the map one last time, then announced to the assembled crew:

“Right here, lads! Right under my feet!”

They let up a loud cheer, then I moved so the five diggers could begin their work.

I imagined they were as excited as I was, because they dug at a furious pace, making quick work of the sandy soil. I stood back and watched as they hauled dirt, their bald heads glistening under the tropical sun. I was fair sweaty myself, but I, and the others, took shade beneath the long branches of the trees.

The men dug for what seemed a long time. I suppose time goes slow when you’re anticipating a big reward. The ground was well over their heads when one gave up a shout. I ran to the edge, my heart pounding.

“Is it there?” I said.

“I think so, captain sir,” said the man who’d shouted.

“Let me see!”

We helped the five men out of the hole, and I was about to lower myself down when I felt a thump on my back and I fell. I hit the bottom, landing awkward on my foot. I couldn’t stand, but the thrill overcame thoughts of pain and confusion. I looked to my feet... and yelled out in fright.

“There’s bones down here!” I said. “And a skull! What kind of treasure is this?”

“Treasure’s all ours captain,” said Billy, looking down the hole. “And she ain’t called The Mutiny for no reason!” He smiled and nodded to the men hidden from my view.

Dirt started to rain down on my head.

“What’s going on?” I shouted. “Get me out now!”

“I think not,” said Billy. “We’re just going to let you rest there with the last captain of The Mutiny. Maybe we’ll find a decent one yet.”

My last cries were muffled...

YOUTUBE

I hear you say how nervous and excited you are. The picture wobbles as you try to capture the scene on your iPhone. A short line of people ahead of you. The steep ascent up many steps. You pan to the right. The sparse hillside with patches of green. Parts of the clear blue sky jump into view as you follow the line up the steps.

You show me the people in front. A man in his fifties with the same excited fear on his face that I hear in your voice. A teenager with pink and yellow hair who tries to look bored to her friends on either side of her, but you capture the vitality in her eyes.

Now you are only a few steps from the top. I can hear the wind against the phone; I imagine you pulling your hair from your face as you talk. Just like you did when we walked on the beach that first night. The night I told you I love you.

The picture shakes violently. Blurred images. Green, brown, blue, faces, arms, hands. Then I see you, smiling so brightly; the sunlight behind you can't compete.

"Thank you so much for this," you say to the phone. I pause the video. I take in your eyes. Your eyebrows. Your lips. Your cheeks. Your joy. Just a moment longer. Then I click the play button.

"This is the best birthday present ever. Ever." You rub your eye with the heel of your hand. Like you did that night we walked on the beach. The night I told you I love you. You release the emotion in a sigh.

"I love you so much," you say. You blow me a kiss. Then I watch as you slip the helmet on your head, and attach the harness to your slender, delicate frame. You seem so sure of yourself. You check every hook and clip, tug at the cord attached to the back. I see the palm of your hand. The picture bounces again, and I hear your voice saying "thank you," to someone just over the noise of your hand on the phone.

The picture settles. Now you're looking out into a valley. The view is spectacular: row upon row of dark green trees scaling the hills on either side. A thin line of water reflecting sunlight below.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" you say. I nod. "See you tomorrow, Joe. I love you."

The screen jumps. You're looking down. The thin line of water is getting wider. It's dotted with rocks. I hear the wind whipping against your phone, and the adrenaline rush in your scream.

I hear a crack.

The picture spins.

Your scream is now one of fear.

Ten seconds of spinning and screaming.

The screen goes blank.

Your family will probably take the video down soon, despite one million YouTube views. But I will never forgive myself. I should have bought you the necklace.