

Dropping Hints, Building Conflict

by B.K. Stevens

Conflict, we know, lies at the heart of fiction. That seems especially true of mystery fiction, where conflict usually leads to crime. But it's not always possible or appropriate to open a mystery with a moment of intense conflict. Sometimes, I think, it's more effective to begin with a quiet scene that drops hints about conflicts to come. And if our characters are so engaging that readers both expect and dread the conflict, that can be a good way to keep them turning pages.

That's the approach I decided to take in my novella-length "The Last Blue Glass" (*Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine*, April 2016; currently an Agatha and Derringer finalist). This is how it begins:

It started as a set of six, the wedding present they bought for themselves. Days after returning from their honeymoon in Cape Cod, hours before throwing their first dinner party, they were peeling potatoes and splitting a Coors when they realized they had only three glasses that matched. Cathy's parents had given them stainless steel flatware for twelve, Frank's mother had given them eight sturdy dinner plates, but nobody had thought about glasses. Even Cathy and Frank hadn't thought about glasses.

That struck them as hilarious. Back then, lots of things struck them as hilarious.

That's about as quiet and undramatic as a scene can get—a married couple in their kitchen, peeling potatoes. I hope the scene engages the reader's sympathies. We all wish newlyweds well, and Cathy and Frank seem like a loving, unpretentious pair. They share household tasks, share a beer, can even share a good laugh at their own expense. And they honeymooned in Cape Cod and not Paris, their flatware is stainless steel and not sterling silver, and they clearly didn't register for crystal goblets at Bloomingdale's. Who wouldn't hope these two will have a long, happy life together?

But already, there are hints of trouble to come. The title, in combination with the first sentence, is one them. "It started as a set of six," but now only one last blue glass remains. I think savvy readers will assume the other five glasses weren't lost through ordinary wear and tear, will suspect the five broken glasses are somehow linked to problems in the marriage. I hope they'll be intrigued by this small mystery and want to know what happened to the other five glasses, what happened to the marriage. "Back then, lots of things struck them as hilarious"—I think that sentence is ominous, too. Once, Cathy and Frank found many reasons to laugh; now, this sentence implies, they no longer do. Again, what happened?

The next few paragraphs introduce traces of conflict, but it seems to be conflict of the mildest, most easily resolved sort:

When they stopped laughing, Cathy said she'd finish making dinner while Frank went to the store. No, he said. This was the first thing they'd be buying for their new home, and they should experience that together. So Cathy called her mother long distance

for advice on keeping peeled potatoes from turning brown, Frank got the fifty-dollar gift card his uncle had given them, and they both raced out to the car.

They spent the whole fifty dollars, plus more for tax. Cathy found a set of eight perfectly attractive clear glasses for half that much, but Frank felt drawn to the blue glasses—tall, pale, translucent, gently squared.

“They look fragile,” Cathy said.

“They’re elegant,” Frank said. “I really want them, Cathy.”

These paragraphs recount two tiny conflicts. Each time, Cathy wants to be practical, and Frank doesn’t; each time, Cathy gives in. What’s wrong with that? Frank’s a romantic, eager to spend time with his wife and to buy beautiful things for their home. And Cathy’s more intent on making her husband happy than on getting her own way. Many people yearn for spouses like these. But readers may wonder if this innocent shopping trip reveals a pattern to their marriage, a pattern that could cause problems later—Frank wanting to do something foolish, Cathy agreeing even though she knows better.

After their dinner guests arrive, more bits of conflict surface—but still, nothing dramatic:

At dinner, Frank’s mother knocked her glass over with her elbow as she reached for the salt, and it fell to the floor and broke.

“I don’t know why you bought such flimsy things,” his mother said, not glancing down. She salted her potatoes, her chicken, her broccoli, everything on her plate before tasting anything.

“Because they’re beautiful.” Cathy gathered the fragments. A shard cut into her finger, and she pressed it against her palm so the blood wouldn’t show. “I love these glasses.” She walked into the kitchen to hold her finger under cold water. Tonight, the nicotine patch definitely wasn’t doing it. She’d have to raid her emergency pack after their guests left.

She filled a pink plastic glass with ice and water for Mrs. Morrell. When Cathy and Frank had gotten engaged, her parents insisted he call them “Mom” and “Dad.” Mrs. Morrell had never said anything like that, so Cathy still called her “Mrs. Morrell,” even though now Cathy was Mrs. Morrell, too.

So it’s been only a few hours, and already the first blue glass has broken. Frank’s mother doesn’t sound like a gem—the sort of dinner guest who assumes anything her hostess cooked will need more salt, who breaks a glass without apologizing or offering to clean up the mess. And she doesn’t hesitate to criticize her son, in front of his friends, for buying something “flimsy.” (She bought him “eight sturdy dinner plates” as a wedding gift, remember—mother and son seem to be very different sorts of people. That may suggest the conflicts between them run deep.)

Cathy, by contrast, rushes to defend Frank—implying she was the one who chose the glasses, picking up the broken bits, hiding a cut that might make his mother sharpen her criticisms. The cut, small as it is, underscores the idea that Cathy may be too ready to sacrifice herself for her husband. She definitely doesn’t seem to care for his mother, who still lets her daughter-in-law call her “Mrs. Morrell”; the plastic glass Cathy gives her may be a token rebellion. And I think

readers will be a little surprised to learn Cathy smokes, and will wonder if that detail might somehow prove significant. If that keeps them reading, good. They'll find they were right to wonder. (And my thanks to *The Poison Lady*, whose Malice Domestic presentation a couple of years ago helped spark the idea for this story.)

When Cathy returns to the dinner table, the suggestions of conflicts to come get slightly stronger:

“Maybe it’s a good omen,” Faye said. She was a graphic designer for a public relations firm, and she was blonde and slender, with fair skin and incredibly dark blue eyes. As usual, she wore a sleeveless, low-cut dress that showcased her precisely toned arms and invited speculation about other assets. “I mean, you just got married, and Greek people break glasses at weddings on purpose, right? For good luck?”

“Not Greek people,” Frank’s older brother said—only four years older, and he’d probably once been as handsome as Frank. But Will was gaunt and sallow now, and his mouth seemed twisted in a permanent smirk. He took a second beer from the six-pack he’d brought as a house-warming present. “Jewish people. I’ve heard about that. Just one glass—the groom crushes it under his foot—and it’s not for good luck. It’s a way of saying you shouldn’t get too excited, because love never lasts.”

“Don’t listen to him, Faye.” Frank touched her hand, lightly, for just a second. “Who’d say that at a wedding? I bet you’re right. I bet it’s for good luck.”

“I went to a Jewish wedding once,” Brian said, establishing himself as the authority. With his height and broad shoulders and confident smile, he never had much trouble becoming the authority. He was Faye’s husband, and he’d been Frank’s best friend for years. “This guy I knew in college. Most things were like a regular wedding, but some were different, and the rabbi explained them. He said they break the glass because the Romans destroyed the temple and made the Jews leave Jerusalem, and that was so sad they always think about it, even at happy times like weddings. He said some things are so sad, and so wrong, you can’t ever get over them. But he didn’t say love never lasts.”

Faye gazed at Frank, tilting her head to the side. “Of course he didn’t,” she said, “because it isn’t true. Anyway, Cathy, the chicken’s great. I love the sauce.”

“The potatoes are underdone.” Mrs. Morrell prodded a slice, making it clear the fork couldn’t go through easily. “You should’ve started them sooner.”

I would have, Cathy thought, but Frank wanted me to help pick the glasses.

Again, Cathy proves a loyal, self-sacrificing wife. In her situation, some wives might be tempted to say, “It’s all Frank’s fault. He kept me from starting the potatoes on time, and he picked out those stupid glasses. Frank, I told you so.” But Cathy stays silent. She doesn’t join in the conversation about breaking glasses, either—she seems content to fade into the background while more dynamic members of the group take over.

Our first glimpses of Will, Faye, and Brian suggest other possible sources of conflict. His brother just got married, and Will bluntly declares “love never lasts”—not a very nice thing to say. He also guzzles up more than his share of the paltry house-warming gift he brought—not a very nice guy. And is something going on between Frank and Faye? When Will says love never lasts, we

might expect Frank to reassure his wife. Instead, he reassures Faye, touching her hand “lightly, for just a second.” If he saw Faye as no more than a friend, he might give her hand a good squeeze. The lightness and brevity of his touch suggest he’s controlling himself, trying to hold back his feelings. After all, Faye’s a beautiful woman. There’s no physical description of Cathy—apparently, her appearance isn’t especially noteworthy—but Faye and her subtly seductive manner of dress are described in some detail. Frank’s good-looking, too: His “gaunt and sallow” brother had “probably once been as handsome as Frank.” And Faye seems attracted to him. When she says it isn’t true that love never lasts, she gazes at Frank, not at her husband. How does Frank’s confident, broad-shouldered best friend feel about that?

The conversation about breaking glasses also brings out the story’s central theme. Brian says Jews break glasses at weddings to recall the destruction of the second temple and the exile from Jerusalem, because “some things are so sad, and so wrong, you can’t ever get over them.” (Brian’s explanation of the custom is correct, by the way.) That idea is brought out again when Cathy’s mother dies, and again at the end of the story. It’s a way of helping readers understand why Cathy takes the actions that she does. Still, though, the story has given readers only hints of conflict.

The story’s first scene ends with three short paragraphs, and with an abrupt shift:

Later, when they’d moved into the living room, while Frank took out his guitar and showed Brian a chord progression he’d just learned, she served lemon pie and thought of the trip to the store. That was a sweet moment, she thought. It’ll always be a sweet memory.

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It turned bitter. Nine years later, Cathy again stood in the kitchen—not the kitchen of their apartment in Newton Upper Falls or of their house in Virginia, but of their condominium in Brookline. Once again, Mrs. Morrell and Will, and Faye and Brian, had come to dinner. But Frank was dead now, supposedly in an accident. Really, Cathy thought, it had been suicide by car, suicide by alcohol. Really, it had been murder. She thought back to that first dinner party. Even then, there were signs. If she’d seen them, could she have prevented it? Maybe not. And what she was doing tonight wouldn’t really set things right. But it was her only way to strike back against things that were wrong.

She gazed at the last blue glass in the cupboard and touched the small bottle in her pocket. I’ll fix a special drink for someone tonight, Frank, she thought, and serve it in the glass we chose together. That’s all I can do for you now.

“The Last Blue Glass” begins with only hints of conflict. I hope that approach will appeal to people who enjoy reading actively, watching for signs of unspoken tensions. But now, the next few sentences shatter the quiet, understated mood. Frank is dead. It was an accident—but to Cathy, the accident was really a suicide, the suicide really a murder. Only one glass of the original six remains, and Cathy clearly plans to use it to poison someone. So there will be a second death. Something has happened, something “so sad and so wrong” that Cathy can’t ever get over it, so sad and so wrong that it’s changed her into a killer. I hope readers will want to read on, to find out what caused this transformation—what happened to Frank, and what

happened to Cathy? And I hope they'll want to find out whom Cathy plans to kill.

Will every reader notice every hint of conflict in this opening scene? Maybe not. But mystery readers tend to be alert, inquisitive types, skilled at reading between the lines, eager to seize on discordant details and explore possible interpretations. Sometimes, I think, it's a good strategy to give readers some work to do, to challenge them to pick up on clues that lie just beneath the surface. We don't always need to hit them in the face with full-fledged conflicts right away. Sometimes, it's better to be a bit mysterious, even in our first two pages.

You can read "The Last Blue Glass" here:

<http://www.bkstevensmysteries.com/book/the-last-blue-glass/>

Bio:



B.K. (Bonnie) Stevens has published over fifty short stories, most of them in *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine*. Eleven of those stories, including Agatha, Macavity, and Derringer finalists, are collected in *Her Infinite Variety: Tales of Women and Crime* (Wildside Press). B.K.'s first novel, *Interpretation of Murder* (Black Opal Books), is a whodunit offering readers insights into Deaf culture. *Fighting Chance* (Poisoned Pen Press), a martial arts mystery for teens, was an Agatha and Anthony finalist. B.K. and her husband, Dennis, live in Virginia with their self-satisfied cat. www.bkstevensmysteries.com.