

AABEHLPT

FRANK BURTON

A:

It always begins with **A**. The first, greatest and most powerful of all letters. It is the first letter of the word 'alphabet' as well as the first letter of my pseudonym, Adam.

My friend Annie has advised me on a number of occasions that I ought to compile a list of things that I alphabetise on a day-to-day basis. For some reason, she seems to think that if I put it all down on paper, it will make me realise how 'ridiculous' my perfectly sensible organisational processes are.

Still, I am not doing this for her benefit. I am doing this simply because I like to alphabetise. To be frank, I am ashamed I never thought of it myself.

B:

Books. Of course, plenty of people alphabetise their books. However, my collection is extra-special. Not only are the volumes on my shelf arranged in an alphabetised order, they are also alphabetised in content. I have an aversion to books that are not structured A-Z, which unfortunately means that I am unable to read anything other than reference books. My collection begins with the *A-Z London* and finishes with *Who's Who*. Don't get me wrong, I'd be happy to read a novel one day if authors of fiction began organising themselves efficiently.

C:

CD Collection. I believe this is also common. Annie herself admits to having an alphabetised CD collection, although when I visited her flat to inspect it, I found it to be nothing of the sort.

'This is not an alphabetised CD collection,' I told her.

'Why not?' she said.

'Well, for one thing, you've only alphabetised by artist and not by album title. Look at this Beatles section. You've put *Abbey Road* way behind all these other ones.'

'They're placed in the order in which they were recorded,' she said. 'Is that a problem?'

'Well, it's your system, I suppose,' I said.

'I'd be interested to know, actually, whereabouts under your system you would place *The White Album*.'

'Well, that's easy, because it's not actually called *The White Album*, it's eponymous. I would place it under B for Beatles.'

'So, you wouldn't put it under T for The Beatles?'

'No, the listing would appear, "Beatles, The." But you can make your own rules regarding 'the' and 'a' and such-like. That's the beauty of it.'

I am not sure she understood the beauty of it.

D:

Dinner. I eat my food in alphabetical order. If I am having soup as a starter, that usually has to be eaten after the main course, unless the main course is something slightly higher up the chain, like spaghetti. By the same rules, if I am having cake for dessert, quite often I have to eat dessert first. There are also occasions when I have to eat dessert halfway through a meal. If I have a glass of wine with the meal, that usually has to wait until last. It is for this reason that I never participate in toasting at weddings, unless it is after food.

E:

Everything. This isn't strictly true, although I wish it were. I only include this as an entry here, as Annie accuses me of doing so all the time: 'Adam, you alphabetise *everything*!' Maybe one day, with enough hard work and effort.

F:

Food. See **Dinner.** The food in my cupboard is alphabetised according to type rather than brand name. For example, in my condiments section, Branston Pickle is placed after Heinz Ketchup, because if I happen to buy another brand of pickle one day, this too will be placed under P for Pickle. Once I have unpacked my shopping and alphabetised it, I then proceed to place the carrier bags in my alphabetised carrier bag drawer. Here, in contrast to the food cupboards, I have decided to sort according to the name of the store where I purchased the bags—*Asda*, *B&Q*, *Costcutter*, and so on. I have found this is the only way to avoid any confusion.

G:

Grapes. See **Food.** This is only a minor category, as there are only ever four kinds of grape in my kitchen: green seeded, green seedless, red seeded, red seedless. It is a rare occasion that all four are present at any one time, although it is worth noting that even if there is only one type of grape in my kitchen, it does not mean that the grapes are not alphabetised. It simply means that the list is very short.

H:

History. A number of the historical encyclopaedias in my collection have timelines at the beginning. I have re-ordered these, and produced what I call 'Time Zigzags' on my computer, detailing each event in its proper order. I have printed them out and pasted them over top of the original timelines.

Time Zigzags are much more in keeping with my own personal view of history. On a conventional timeline, the English Civil War appears after the Renaissance. To me, this is clearly wrong. What does it matter what year a particular event took place? It is in the past. Finished. This does not mean we shouldn't alphabetise them for posterity, of course.

There are some historical events that appear at roughly the same position on both a timeline and a Time Zigzag—the World Wars, for example—but this is pure coincidence.

Time Zigzags are probably my second favourite alphabetising scheme. As far as I know, no one else has ever had such a notion and, frankly, I can see why. It only occurred to me after completing them that their criss-crossed lines appear to resemble the display on a heart monitor—a sure sign that I have my 'finger on the pulse.'

I:

Instructions. Not being the most technically-minded person, I often have to consult the instructions for my computer. These are filed neatly into the C section of my collected instructions. Now, some might ask, if I use these instructions on a regular basis, why don't I keep them out on the desk next to my computer? Indeed, Annie posed this very question recently.

'Well, for one thing,' I said, 'I might lose them. That isn't the only reason, but it's a fundamental truth that things left lying around will go astray, unless they are kept in some kind of order.'

'Hence the alphabetising,' she said.

'And what is that supposed to mean?'

'I think you alphabetise things in order to stop yourself from losing anything.'

'As I say, that is one factor—'

'I don't mean to get too deep here,' she said, 'but could it be something to do with losing your parents when you were young?'

'Don't be stupid,' I said. 'To "lose" someone is just a figure of speech that people use when they don't want to use words like "death". My parents *died*. I didn't *lose* them.'

'I know, I know,' she said, 'but maybe you still feel guilty about it.'

'I didn't kill them,' I said.

'No, no, I'm not saying you did. What I'm saying is—'

'What you're saying is, you think I'm obsessed. Perhaps I am, but isn't everybody obsessed with something? You seem to be obsessed with me and my obsessions.'

'Somebody's got to be.'

I am not entirely sure what she meant.

J:

Jumpers. These are filed according to the predominant colour. Jumpers with patterns on them that do not have one predominant colour are filed under M for 'Mixed.' Jumpers in the Mixed section are then filed according to the two most prominent colours. For example, 'Blue, Black' comes before 'Blue, Grey.'

K:

Keyboard. I have re-ordered the keys on my keyboard to replace the nonsensical QWERTYUIOP etc with the far more pleasing and user-friendly ABCDEFGHIJ. Frankly, I do not know what the manufacturers were thinking. I have also tried my best to alphabetise the punctuation marks, although the technician who re-ordered my keyboard for me said he could do nothing about the fact that colon and semi-colon are included on the same key. This made me very angry. It's a jump of sixteen whole letters! I later reassured myself that a semi-colon could realistically be filed under C, as, after all, it is a type of colon. I'm still not very happy about this, but I try not to think about it too much.

L:

Laundry. Don't even get me started on laundry. For an insight into a typical laundry day, see Jumpers. The same general rules apply to each article of clothing, but of course they need to be filed by type first. Laundry days are by far the longest of my week, and can at times be a genuine test of faith in the whole system.

I don't want to talk about laundry.

M:

Money. I have created a series of small pockets in my wallet for small change to be sorted, according to its alphabetical rather than numerical value: Fifty Pence, Five Pence, One Pence, One Pound, Ten Pence, Twenty Pence, Ten Pence, Two Pence, Two Pounds. In a conventional alphabetised list, these coins would be ordered according to the value of the number. However, I have always been opposed to this tradition

of placing numbers before letters in an alphabetised list, somehow suggesting that numerical figures are more worthy of our attention.

That said, I do acknowledge that mine is a controversial view, and certainly do not begrudge any individual who decides to order their coins numerically. It is, after all, probably a little easier that way.

N:

Neapolitan Ice Cream. I prefer to eat Neapolitan ice cream in alphabetical order, chocolate first, then strawberry, then vanilla. This is a very difficult task, and requires me to separate each flavour into a separate bowl, disposing of any parts in which two flavours have mingled together. Often, by the time this task is completed, the ice cream has already melted. I have recently stopped purchasing Neapolitan ice cream, as I have come to the conclusion that it is a lot simpler to purchase individual flavours separately. Technically, therefore, Neapolitan ice cream should not be part of this list, but I have included it here, as I could not think of anything else that I alphabetise that starts with the letter N. Apologies.

O:

Oranges. Unlike many other people, I am able to distinguish between various different types, and have arranged my oranges alphabetically, from clementines through to tangerines. The only slight problem that remains is that I have never been able to adequately distinguish tangerines from satsumas. I suspect that they are one and the same, but there remains a lingering doubt. The fact that the letters S and T are alphabetical neighbours provides me with some small comfort.

P:

People. I managed to upset Annie recently. We were having a particularly intimate conversation, in which she revealed some quite surprising facts about her childhood. We were sitting together on her bed, holding hands as we often would when having a heart-to-heart.

She hugged me, and thanked me for being there.

'I'm so glad you thought of calling me today, Adam,' she said.

'I'm glad too,' I said.

'You know you're my best friend, don't you?' she said. 'I know I've only known you for a couple of years, Adam, but I think you're the best friend I've ever had. I really mean that.'

'You're my best friend too,' I said, and I also meant exactly what I said.

'What made you think of me today?' she said.

'I just wanted to talk to someone,' I said. 'Whenever I do, I always call you.'

'That is so sweet,' she said. 'God, Adam, I think I'm going to cry. We just have this great connection, don't we? And it's not like a sexual thing, or anything, it's like something more important than that.'

'I agree,' I said. 'But, really, you shouldn't think of it as sweet.'

'Why not?' she said.

'Well, you know how I like to alphabetise things?'

'Yes?'

'Your number is the first number in my phone, and it's also the first number in my address book. It's because your name begins with the letter A.'

There was a long silence.

'It's your turn to speak,' I said. 'I spoke then stopped so that means that it's your go. You'd be rude not to.'

'Rude? *Rude*? Get out. Get out, now. I don't want to speak to you. Right now, I don't think I ever want to speak to you again.'

Obediently, I left the room, and went to the hallway to put my shoes on.

Annie came after me.

'So that's really it?' she said. 'That's the only reason we're such good friends? That's the only reason you called me today? Because my name appears first in your phone?'

'Yes,' I said. 'But for once, this isn't me and my so-called "obsession." Mobile phones automatically alphabetise names. Address books start with the letter A. It isn't me, it's *society*.'

'Sort yourself out,' she said. 'Think about what it is that you're saying. I want you to go away now, and don't come back until you've realised that people are more important than *letters*.'

I have seen her since that conversation. But the fact of the matter is, I'm not sure that people *are* more important than letters. It's such an unfair comparison. When a person dies, it is sad, but society continues happily without them, almost as though they were never there in the first place. Conversely, if we lost one of the letters in the alphabet, everything would grind to a halt.

Q:

Quick Brown Fox Jumps Over A Lazy Dog, The. I would just like to take this opportunity to say that I hate this sentence. Is it supposed to be clever, or something?

R:

Rubbish. I have several bins, for both recyclable and non-recyclable waste. This has proven to be a major problem, as there are many different items that need to be disposed of on a day-to-day basis, and it is simply not practical to have a separate bin for each of them. At one point, I had thirty-seven swing-top bins, many of which spent most of their time empty, as they were reserved for items that I do not normally use. I have recently revised this system in the interests of floorspace. Whereas before I had a bin reserved specifically for banana skins, I now have a bin for all leftover fruit and veg. I used to have separate bins for newspapers, magazines and envelopes, but now I simply have a bin for wastepaper.

I would like to state categorically that I not in any way regard this revision as a defeat. Alphabetising is about being practical, and if something is not practical, it needs to be adjusted in order to make it so.

S:

Stamps. If, indeed, Annie is right, and I 'have a problem,' perhaps this springs from the fact that my father was an obsessive stamp collector. I inherited his extensive stamp collection, and have since alphabetised it (a task that took several weeks) before locking it away, not intending to expand the collection any further.

I am interested in my father, but I am not interested in stamps, alphabetised or otherwise.

T:

The. As I have already suggested, under my system, anything beginning with the word ‘The’ should not be filed under the letter T, but under the first letter of the word following the word ‘The’.

U:

Underwear. See **Jumpers** for general clothing guidelines.

V:

Vests. See above.

W:

Words. Well, this is my most radical idea to date, which has thus far attracted no adherents whatsoever. This does not necessarily mean that the idea is not a wonderful one. Alphabetising words effectively brings about a brand new language, based closely on English, but resembling something else entirely. For example, a simple sentence such as ‘The cat sat on the mat,’ under my new system reads, ‘Eht act ast no eht amt.’ Admittedly, it is a difficult language to learn, not to mention pronounce, and requires a lot of dedication. At present, I am spending around four to five hours every day perfecting the art of what I like to call, ‘Aabehlpt Aekps,’ or ‘Alphabet Speak,’ to give it its translated English name. I am now reaching a point that may almost be defined as fluent.

It’s just a shame that I’m the only person who can actually speak the language.

X:

Xylophone. I bought one especially for the purposes of compiling this list. Of course, the beauty of my xylophone is that its notes are already alphabetised without me having to lift a finger. Well, I suppose they

would have been, had there only been one scale of notes instead of three. The notes on my xylophone now run: A, A, A, B, B, B, and so on. It is still possible to play a coherent tune—it is simply a matter of observing the order in which the notes have been placed.

Y:

Yoghurt. There is a particular type of yoghurt that I sometimes buy that has fruit in one section, and yoghurt in another. I am guessing that the manufacturers intended for people to mix the two together, but I find it a lot more pleasing to eat the fruit first. It doesn’t matter what the fruit is, it will never beat the yoghurt in the race to finish last. Not unless there is a fruit out there that begins with the letter Z. I’m not sure that such a fruit currently exists.

Z:

Zoo Animals. In a bid to make amends with Annie, I agreed to meet up with her at a neutral location. I suggested going for a coffee but Annie insisted on a day out at the zoo. It is not a place that I would ordinarily visit but, considering the circumstances, I chose not to refuse.

‘So,’ she said as I arrived, ‘how are you?’

It had been several weeks since our little misunderstanding, and although we’d spoken several times on the phone, actually meeting her in person brought about a certain amount of tension, marked by the absence of any physical contact.

‘Fine,’ I said.

‘Look, thanks for coming. You know, for making the effort.’

‘I’m not sure that you’ll like what I’m about to say next,’ I said, ‘but if it’s OK with you, I’d like to wear a blindfold.’

‘Won’t you miss all the animals?’

‘You misunderstand. What I’d like to do is wear the blindfold in between the different sections in order to view the animals in alphabetical order. I’ve obtained a copy of the site map, and traced an appropriate route. So, if it’s OK, you can guide me.’

She shrugged. ‘Whatever.’

Being unable to see was not a comfortable experience, but if I had to look at animals I was determined to do it properly. I realised as we walked arm-in-arm that there was really only one person in the world that I could trust to accompany me in this manner. I felt safe with Annie, in the same way that I feel safe when I'm alone.

She raised her fingers to my face and removed the blindfold.

I opened my eyes.

She was smiling.

I returned the gesture, and looked beyond her over the nearby fence.

'What's that?' I said.

'It's a yak,' she replied, rather proudly.

'I don't understand.'

'Well, it was going to be a zebra, but they don't have any zebras.'

'You did this deliberately?'

'Yes,' she said. Her hand was on my back, stroking. 'You see, here we are, two friends at the zoo, looking at a yak. And where's the harm in that? You're still alive.'

'I didn't think I was going to die,' I said. 'I just prefer it...'

'But you can't always get what you want, Adam. Sometimes you have to accommodate for things that are beyond your control. *Most* of the time, in fact. It's what people do.'

'It's not what I do.'

'It should be,' she said. 'We all need to lose control every once in a while. You need *freedom*, Adam—you need to start breaking some of these self-imposed rules and start *living*.'

'I'm already alive, thanks.'

'Look,' she said, pointing to the yak.

I didn't look.

'It's an animal,' she said. 'A for Animal. The next one will also be an animal. If you can't bring yourself to break the rules, can't you *change* them at least?'

'Because they're all different animals, you stupid bitch.'

Her hand disappeared. 'I'm sorry, I can't do this anymore.'

I couldn't watch her walking away. Still, a part of me was glad she was going. After all, those needless questions were running along behind her.

With hindsight, I'd like to think that however sincere her intentions, she remained wrong.

I was better off without the aggravation.

Plenty more where she came from, anyway.

There's always Belinda.

FRANK BURTON was born in Lancashire in 1979. He is a writer, surrealist and performance poet. He has been published in magazines such as *Poetry Monthly*, *Pulsar*, *Obsessed With Pipework* and *Monkey Kettle*. He does not have a favourite colour.

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