

OCCASIONAL FRIENDS

A SHORT STORY

BY

FRANK MARTIN



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Occasional Friends

by Frank Martin

Saturdays are usually the same for Sean. He and his four best friends order some fast food, head to one of their basements, and play video games until they eventually pass out. It was fun for them and Sean was content spending his high school weekends being nerdy with his closest friends. He didn't need to run around causing trouble or getting drunk like most of his classmates...including her.

Sean could thank Amanda's mom for being the sole reason she even knew of his existence. Their mothers were best friends before they were born; so naturally they had play dates all the way up to middle school. It was around that time when Amanda's looks pulled her in the direction of popularity and left Sean behind. But despite their different cliques, Amanda and Sean were still friends. They continued to talk in the halls at school and would even share the random meal together outside of school grounds. But when the weekend came along, she had partying to do while Sean stayed safe in his friend's basement.

Sean sat there playing with his friends, but his mind was off in another place. He would imagine he and Amanda on a roller coaster together or burying each other in the sand at the beach. His friends screamed at the television screen while he just sat back and fantasized

the day when he finally built up enough courage to tell her how he felt. He pictured himself in the courtyard of their school, wrapping his arms around her waist as he brought her in close and kissed her lips.

But like in all of Sean's fantasies, he was ripped back to reality where he and Amanda were nothing more than occasional friends. This time the snap back to the real world was caused by his friend Bill smacking him on the shoulder. "Come on, dude. We're losing by fifteen."

"Chill out!" Sean snapped at him. "It's just a game."

Bill's back stiffened, genuinely surprised by the reaction. "Whoa, man. Sorry. Jeez."

Sean went back to playing the game, but he could feel his friend's eyes leering. The four of them continued to play game after game in the muggy basement until Sean's phone vibrated on the coffee table. The four friends all turned around and looked at the clock, which read just past midnight.

"That better not be your mom," Rob said. "You're sixteen years old, Sean. You should be able to spend a night away from home by now."

"Screw you, asshole."

Sean's heart dropped into his stomach when he saw he had a text message from Amanda. Bill looked over and noticed Sean staring down

at the phone instead of playing the game. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. I’ll be right back.”

Sean stood and walked to the back of the basement while reading the text: Call me...please.

He dialed Amanda’s number by heart and his arm shook as he put the phone to his ear. It rang once, twice, and then Amanda picked up.

“Hello?” Sean could hear the tears in her voice.

“Amanda, hey. What’s up?”

“I’m sorry, Sean. But...can you pick up me up. I need a ride.”

“What’s wrong?”

“Just come please.”

“Tell me where you are. I’ll be right there.”

Sean hung up the phone and began walking up the stairs.

“Hey!” Rob yelled out stopping Sean in his tracks. “Where the hell are you going?”

Sean turned around embarrassed. “There’s just something I gotta do.”

“It’s not that girl again, is it?” Sean looked down at the ground in shame.

“Come on, Sean,” Bill nagged. “She has a boyfriend. She’s never going to get with you.”

“She just needs a ride.”

“And why does it have to be you, huh?”

Sean continued up the stairs while Rob turned Bill back around.
“Forget him, man. Let’s keep playing.”

Outside in his car, Sean turned the ignition and his eyes were drawn to a piece of paper slid into the visor. He reached for it and carefully pulled it out from the flap. He then unfolded it and straightened out the wrinkles against the steering wheel. The long note had a small rip in the top right corner and dirt marks worn in between the lines. He would read it, but Sean could recite the letter from memory by now. Back in middle school he would rewrite his feelings over and over. If the letter weren’t good enough he would crumple it into a ball and throw it from his desk into the trashcan. But after thirty drafts he came to realize no words could make Amanda understand how he felt. But still, he saved the last copy. When he bought the car he tucked it away just in case he somehow grew enough courage to hand it to her, but he knew that time would never come. Sean brushed the thought aside, crumpled up the paper, and threw it into the left corner of the dashboard.

After about twenty minutes of driving Sean finally turned down the street Amanda had given him. She told him she would be waiting out front, so Sean drove slowly and looked for a figure by the curb.

Instead, his attention was drawn to a loud house party down the street, which, not surprisingly, was at the address Amanda had given him. Sean drove slowly past the house but didn't see Amanda sitting out front. He contemplated stopping but looked ahead to spot a girl walking down the sidewalk.

Sean parked the car, got out, and called Amanda's name. The surprised girl jumped as she turned around, but then let out a sigh of relief when she saw Sean walking in her direction. Amanda ran towards him and jumped into his arms. Sean laughed as she plowed into him. "Whoa. Easy there."

He wrapped his arms around her and breathed in the smell of her bright blonde hair. Her perfume mixed with whatever shampoo she used earlier in the night, and the scent allowed Sean to close his eyes and enjoy being close to her. But as she backed out of his arms, the stench of the cheap alcohol on her breath snapped him out of bliss.

Sean took a moment to admire her subtle beauty before asking what was wrong, but instead of responding, Amanda grabbed him by the hand and rushed him back to the car. "Come on. We have to go."

Sean opened the passenger side door for her and then shut it as she got inside. He walked around the front of the car and heard someone call out Amanda's name as he stepped into the driver's seat.

Without asking questions, Sean quickly put the car in gear and drove away, catching a faint glimpse of Amanda's boyfriend in the rearview mirror.

Sean turned down the first street they came across and approached a red light. He then looked over at Amanda, her head buried by the window and trying to hide her tears.

Sean reached across and opened up the glove compartment. "So what happened?" he asked while handing her a small package of tissues.

"Tommy happened," Amanda responded as she wiped away her tears. "I can't stand him anymore. I'm so through with his bullshit."

Sean's eyes perked at her answer. "What did he do?"

"I saw him making out with some girl. And then he had the nerve to call *me* a whore."

"Who was the girl?"

"What does it matter?!" she snapped at him, shocked by the question.

Sean gulped and fixed his focus on the road ahead. "I'm sorry. I just "

"Ughh!" Amanda exclaimed in guilty frustration. "No. I'm sorry. I shouldn't flip out at you. It's just...he told me he loved me tonight. Do you believe that? Before we got to the party we had one of

those talks, ya know? One of those Dawson's Creek moments where everything seemed perfect."

Sean sighed. "Yeah. I guess."

"But no. Nothing's ever perfect is it? Three hours later he's in the living room with his tongue down some skank's throat."

"Cheerleader?"

Amanda's jaw fell, surprised by his guess. "Yeah. How'd you know?"

Sean shrugged unenthusiastically. "He's a football jock. Make sense for him to get with a cheerleading skank."

Amanda giggled as she wiped away her tears. "Maybe I should be a cheerleader then."

"Did you just call yourself a skank?"

Amanda smiled and laughed even harder. "No! I'm just saying that maybe he would like me more if I quit track and joined the squad."

"Are you kidding?!" Sean continually tried to glance over to Amanda while keeping his eyes on the road. "You're awesome at track."

Amanda waved off his praise. "Oh, shut up. You know I suck."

"I'm serious. You remember last year at State's? You blew

everyone away.”

“You were there?” Amanda asked, pleasantly surprised.

“Well...yeah. There was no way I was missing it.”

Amanda didn't respond. Not right away. She just smiled and stared at Sean while he drove. “Thanks, Sean.”

Sean squirmed in his seat, uncomfortable being the focus of her gaze. “For what?”

“Just everything. And I'm really sorry about ruining your Saturday night. I would have called someone else but everyone I know that would do this for me was at that party.”

Sean had no response. He just kept his eyes on the road and continued on ahead as Amanda curiously glanced around the neighborhood. “Wait. You're not taking me home are you?”

“Well...it's getting late. I'm sure your mom is worried that ”

“Oh, please, Sean,” Amanda interrupted. “It's not that late and who cares about my mom. Besides, you're not going to let a girl go home on an empty stomach, are you?”

Her eyes fluttered as she asked the question, putting a smile on Sean's face. “Uh, okay. Where do you want to go?”

Amanda shrugged with a smirk. “Wherever's open.”

The couple approached the diner's podium, and Amanda held out

two fingers, signaling to a middle-aged woman in a waitress uniform. “Booth for two, please.”

The woman picked up two menus from the counter and walked into the seating area. With the woman’s back turned, Amanda quickly reached behind the podium and grabbed a package of crayons and a children’s menu before following Sean to their booth.

“I love these kiddie menus,” Amanda said, sliding into the booth opposite Sean. “Don’t you?”

“Well...I don’t think I’m in a grilled cheese and milkshake kind of mood, Amanda.”

She giggled while ripping open the package of crayons. “I’m serious. They have puzzles and pictures to color. The real menus are so boring.”

“I think many adults outgrow that whole coloring stage when they graduate elementary school.”

Amanda leaned over the table to give Sean a playful shove on the arm. “Well while you sit there bored I’ll be exercising my mind.”

After ordering their food, Amanda continued to play with her menu. “Damn, I just can’t finish this maze.”

“How can you not do it? It’s made for twelve years old.”

“Okay, then you come here and figure it out,” Amanda said as she held up the blue crayon.

Sean stood and swiveled around to sit on the other side of the booth. “Move over and let me show you how it’s done.”

He leaned in close to Amanda and gently placed his hand on top of hers. He then guided her arm to the paper and lightly moved the crayon around the maze without making a mark. “The key to a maze is not committing one way or another. You need to look at all of your options before making a decision. And then...when you’re absolute sure which way is the right one...you go for it.”

Sean held Amanda’s hand tighter as he pushed the crayon down at the start of the maze and, in one smooth motion, drew his way to the finish. “See. Simple.”

Amanda barely moved her head to look over at Sean while he continued to stare at their clasped hands. She smiled lightly and moved her hand down the table to place it on Sean’s leg. “How’d you get so smart?”

Sean’s gaze awkwardly fell down to the table as he shot up from the booth. “Uh...you know. Studying and stuff.”

He sat back down on the other side and Amanda rolled her eyes while taking a sip of water. “Okay then.”

She then picked up a different color crayon to doodle some more on the menu. “So how’s your mom? I haven’t seen her in like two years.”

Sean shrugged. “She’s okay, I guess.”

“I remember when we were little and played in your back yard. She would bring out apples all cut up with peanut butter to dip them in. They were soooooo good.”

“Yeah.” Sean’s head bobbed up and down as he recalled the memory. “I do remember that.”

“That was like in what? Third grade?”

“Yup. The good old days...before you ditched me for the ‘cool kids’.”

Amanda looked up from the menu with a raised eyebrow and tilted her head to the side. “I ditched you? Oh please, Sean. I wasn’t the one who took all those advanced classes in middle school. You knew I couldn’t get into them. I can barely do the work for the classes I’m in now.”

“You could’ve still talked to me. And now in high school I feel like your pet. Like you just hang out with me when it’s most convenient for you.”

Amanda’s jaw dropped in exaggerated shock. “Are you kidding? I say ‘hi’ to you all the time in the hallway and you just wave and keep walking.”

“Oh yeah, right. Like I’m really going to stop and talk to you when you’re standing next to your boyfriend and half the football

team.”

Amanda threw her head back laughing. “Tommy? Come on, Sean. He’s all talk. And besides, I don’t think I’m gonna have much to do with him after tonight anyway.”

Sean was torn, hopeful yet skeptical at the same time. He wanted to be supportive but couldn’t stop himself from rolling his eyes. Amanda just put her head down and continued drawing on the menu.

After leaving the diner, Sean pulled up in front of Amanda’s house and put the car in park. “It was a fun night.”

She nodded in agreement. “Yeah. You’re right. It really was.”

After a silent pause, Sean contemplated leaning forward and pressing his lips against hers. He even pictured himself sliding his arms around her while staring in her bright green eyes and telling her how he felt. But the pounding of his heart was too much for him to bear. He broke eye contact and started fiddling with the radio. “You know they always have the best music on at this time of night.”

Amanda continued to stare at Sean as a small smile grew across her face. She reached forward, put her hand to his and used it to turn the radio off. “Just leave it quiet for now.”

Sean slowly pulled his hand back and used all his strength to

keep from making eye contact. He could feel Amanda's stare piercing through him and wanted so bad to be able to look back at her without having his stomach tense into knots. He could feel the sweat drip down the side of his face and his gaze danced around the car. After surveying the windshield, the crumpled up letter in the corner of the dashboard caught his eye. Sean reached out for it but froze when he saw his hand shaking. He held it there for a couple seconds before Amanda broke his concentration. "What is it?"

Sean jumped and quickly moved his hand to the armrest to unlock her door. "You should go inside. Your mom is probably worried."

"I told you before. Forget about my mom and start thinking about yourself."

Amanda unbuckled her seatbelt and leaned over the center console to the driver's seat. She stopped with her face right in front of Sean's and stared into his eyes. Sean tried his hardest to control his rapid breaths, but his body wouldn't let him. "Amanda, I..."

Amanda stopped his sentence by closing her eyes and pressing her lips against his. Sean's eyes shot wide open for a moment before he slowly closed them and wrapped his arms around her neck. He sensed his body growing loose as he eased back comfortably into his seat, but then suddenly pulled his head back when he felt Amanda's tongue slip

into his mouth. "Stop. Please, just stop."

Amanda slowly leaned away, a confused look etched into her face. "Wh What's wrong? Did I do something?"

"No...I mean. Yes, you did but...we shouldn't, Amanda."

"Why not?" she asked, furrowing her brow. "You like me, don't you?"

"It's just...you've been drinking and you just want to get back at Tommy."

Amanda rapidly shook her head. "What? No. That's not true."

"Then why are you doing this? I know it's not 'cause you like me."

"Sean...I..."

Sean prayed for her to say he was wrong. He hoped for her to confess her love for him and tell him they should be together. But she didn't. Instead, she slunk down into her seat and stayed there a moment before opening the door and stepping out of the car.

Sean closed his eyes, sucked in a deep breath, and lowered his head with his hands on the steering wheel. As he opened his eyes he could sense Amanda staring at him from the sidewalk. He wanted to look back and give her a smile, but he kept his head down and his eyes straight on the road ahead. Amanda turned to continue walking up to her house. When he sensed she was gone, Sean finally turned to watch

her slip inside the front door. He then sighed, put the car in gear, and headed back to his friend's basement.

About the Author

Frank Martin is a comic writer and author that is not as crazy as his work makes him out to be...seriously.

His novels include the zombie horror *Mountain Sickness* published by Severed Press and the YA sci-fi thriller *Predestiny* published by Crossroad Press. Frank has also had comic shorts appear in the "fluff noir" anthology series *Torsobear* published by Source Point Press. In addition, Frank wrote and produced the comic anthology series *Modern Testament*, which features a wide ensemble of artists throughout its four volumes. Frank's most recent sci-fi novel, *A Weapon's Journey*, was published by Crossroad Press this past spring.

Frank currently lives in New York with his wife and three kids. For more of his work you can visit his website at www.frankthewriter.com.