



# F BOMB

By

*Sean MacKendrick*

**WHY I LIKE IT: Fiction Editor JOEY CRUSE writes...**

*I like Sean MacKendrick's, "F Bomb," because the story Shyamalan-ed me. I remembered what it was like to have that great sense of euphoria at being tricked, to have the wool pulled from your eyes and realize it was you who were your own undoing all along. A group of friends sit around playing Scrabble while a collective fog seems to sit on top of everyone. Something isn't quite right. Quite right indeed. In all honesty, this story finally made me realize how horrible I am at Scrabble – so there's that. But this story also manages to pull off something that I love in fiction, the plot takes an unassuming and mundane act and slams you through a new dimension of genre and perception. What once could have been a group of whomever friends playing a board game in an unassuming room can quickly take a back alley into horror or psychological thriller – and pleasant even more so that it is wrapped up within a short form, concision and style flowing nicely so that you want more.*

*I think that there is something to respect in crafting a story that manages to surprise you - being able to create an illusion just long enough to suspend belief and hold a small moment of pure, "a-ha," and we smile at beauty's simplicity. "F Bomb," may make you feel stupid, as it did me, but it's a good piece of fiction and I hope that you enjoy.*

*Read on.*

**QUALITY QUOTABLE (for the love of language...)**

Stephen pressed his knuckles against his eyes. "This isn't real," he said. "OK, never mind that. What is this pizza we're eating? No, I can see that's unclear. Meals are what? Blank and drink?"

Randi edged her chair away. She said, "Calories. Protein?"

Stephen coughed a barking laugh. He picked up the dictionary they set ready to settle arguments and thumbed through it, scowling.

"Hey, no cheating!" said Tomas.

"I'm going insane," he said. Air hissed out his nostrils. "It's not in here. An entire letter has gone missing. I don't know what's happening. Wait a minute. Wait."

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“Your turn, dude,” Randi said.

“Yeah, I know.” Stephen laid down two letter tiles, turning NICE into NICETY. “I was just hoping I had a better option somewhere. Eh, eleven points, that’s not too bad.”

He grabbed the last remaining tile from the bag and added it to his rack. AGJQWB. “That’s all the letters,” he said.

Randi used an open L to create LIME. “Six, on a double word score, that’s twelve points to me,” she said, adding her score to the notepad. “Which is better than your eleven, just in case you were wondering.”

Tomas played TOQUE and looked smug about it.

Rene used the T to spell TOT, Carlos used an A to make AN, and it was back to Stephen and his useless letters. He pointed to the board’s lower right corner where ART and ACES intersected. Both words had open leading spaces. He said, “I really wanted one good letter to play here, but just never drew it. And it would have worked on both words. One way more childish so you know I would have picked it.”

“MART and MACES?” Rani pointed to MALL near the top. “You played your M like three rounds ago. Getting senile, old man.”

“No, not M. You can guess the letter.” Stephen glanced around the table at multiple blank stares. “Come on,” he said. “Really?”

He leaned to the side in his seat and blew a raspberry sound. He said, “You don’t get it?”

Tomas said, “You playing or not?”

Stephen searched the board and scowled. “Hey, it’s not here at all. No one drew those tiles.”

Randi picked up the empty bag and shook it. She said, “Nothing else to draw.”

The letter counts were written in a grid on the Scrabble board's side. Stephen tilted his head and read the list out loud. "A-9, B-2, C-2, D-4, E-12, G-3, H-2..." He blinked at the board. "Wait a minute, it's not even listed."

"What's not listed?" Rene asked.

"That one," Stephen said, growing louder. He pointed to the counts. "There's one missing. You know what I'm talking about."

Randi read through the letters and give Stephen a blank look.

Pink crept into Stephen's cheeks. "Come on," he said. "Stop playing stupid. This is weirding me out."

"What letter do you think should be here?" Rene asked again.

Stephen stood and gripped the table. "I can't remember its name, but it should be there," he said.

"Hey, bro," Randi said. "Don't get upset, just--"

"Mother!" Stephen shouted. He pointed at Randi. "Who is your mother married to?"

Randi leaned back, putting distance between her nose and Stephen's protruding digit. She said, slowly, "She's happily married to my dad. His name is Arthur."

"And dad is also known as?" Stephen said.

"Papa?" Carlos said.

Stephen pressed his knuckles against his eyes. "This isn't real," he said. "OK, never mind that. What is this pizza we're eating? No, I can see that's unclear. Meals are what? Blank and drink?"

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The room was silent as Stephen muttered, eyes squeezed shut. "I've almost got it. My granddad, my dad's dad, grandmother and grand..."

He opened his eyes. "My grandfather's name is Fred."

“OK, that’s great,” Tomas said.

“Father. Food. Fart faces. Fabulous Frank’s Family Friendly Farm Fresh Flapjacks!” Stephen shouted. He flopped into his chair and let out a shivering sigh.

“Hey, there are two tiles left,” Randi said, feeling the bag.

Stephen said, “Let me guess, both F’s?”

Randi dumped two F tiled into her palm. “Huh, that’s weird.”

“That’s weird?” Stephen said. He looked at the F-2 entry in the letter counts. He flipped the dictionary open to France. “Reality just hiccupped on us. You all saw that, right?”

“Can we just finish this game already?” Carlos said. “We’ve been playing for two hours.”

Stephen said, “Oh, it hasn’t been any two hours.” He checked his phone. “It’s four fifty now and we started, what, just before four.”

Carlos said, “We started around two thirty. OK, so closer to an hour-and-a-half. Still a long game.”

A wall clock ticked away the time on the wall. Stephen watched the secondhand rotate. He said, absently, “It wasn’t two o’clock. That’s not right.”

The second hand completed a circle and started a new minute. Stephen quietly counted as it passed one, then two, then four, then five, then...

He counted eleven numbers on the clock.

Stephen said, “Aw, shit.”

**AUTHOR’S NOTE:** *This story was inspired by those little moments when simple truths fail you. Your phone isn’t on the table where you placed it seconds ago. You can’t recall your sibling’s name. It’s about the beauty and fallibility of memory. The straightforward style here is influenced by writers like Stephen King, whose books tend to remain grounded in reality even when exploring fantastical events.*

**AUTHOR BIO:** Sean MacKendrick splits his time between Colorado and Texas. When not writing he works as a data engineer. His stories have appeared previously, or will soon be appearing, publications such as Underside Stories, In Another Time, and Scribes Micro Fiction.