

Exit Strategy

By Tom Moran

Setting

The time: A succession of Saturday nights

The place: Sully's sports bar

Characters

SEAN, 20's - 30's

ANNIE, 20's - 30's

BARB, 20's - 30's

CINDY, 20's - 30's

(The female characters can be triple-cast, with costume accents to distinguish between them.)

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Scene 1

(SEAN and ANNIE sit across from each other. Both have empty glasses in front of them, and jackets draped over their chairs. ANNIE finishes her drink.)

SEAN

Do you want another one of those - what are they - boysenberry daiquiris?

ANNIE

It's a dirty martini.

SEAN

Right. One of those.

ANNIE

Seriously? Is a boysenberry daiquiri even a thing?

SEAN

Sorry. Hey, have I told you how pretty your hair looks in the moonlight?

ANNIE

We're indoors.

SEAN

Yeah, but I mean when we're outside, and it's dark. Is what I meant.

ANNIE

Sean, just stop.

SEAN

Stop what?

ANNIE

(stares down at empty glass)

I don't think this is working out.

SEAN

What do you mean?

ANNIE

Us. Us is not working out. You're a nice enough guy, but-

SEAN  
(kidding desperately)  
Yay! I'm nice enough!

ANNIE  
*But.*

SEAN  
Oh. (Realizing.) Oh.

ANNIE  
Yeah. I just think that we're-

SEAN  
Wait wait. Hold that thought, Annie.

ANNIE  
Can I just get this out?

SEAN  
Just a second-

(SEAN roots around in his jacket, and pulls out some sheets of paper and a pen. After this he sporadically takes notes.)

SEAN(cont.)  
Here it is. (He reads off the document.) "Thank you for your interest in Sean Taylor, and we are sorry to learn his affections do not suit your present needs. In order that Sean can offer superior service in the future, please take a few moments to fill out this brief survey."

(Pause.)

ANNIE  
What the hell are you talking about?

SEAN  
What, you've never had an exit interview before?

ANNIE  
Yeah, when I quit at Kinko's.

SEAN

Then you get the idea. Look, this will help some future woman to not go through what you've apparently gone through. Be a humanitarian here.

ANNIE

(shrugs)

Sure. What the hell.

SEAN

Great. So. What was most satisfying about your time with me?

ANNIE

Hmm. Your dog.

SEAN

Sparky?

ANNIE

Yeah. He's frikkin' adorable.

SEAN

So the best thing about me isn't actually me.

ANNIE

I guess you could put it that way. Hey, can I fill out a survey about Sparky? I'd have a lot of nice things to say.

SEAN

I could use something a bit more pertinent, Annie.

ANNIE

Okay. Do you want to know what was *least* satisfying about dating you?

SEAN

Not that pertinent. Were your duties as girlfriend characterized correctly during the courting process?

ANNIE

Where are you getting this?

SEAN

Web site. Bit of paraphrasing.

ANNIE

You did seem to expect me to cook for you a lot. I mean, I remember when I opened your fridge for the first time. Two six-packs and a bottle of mustard. And not even good mustard.

SEAN

There were also some hot dogs.

ANNIE

Hot dog buns, Sean. Buns.

SEAN

And that's an important food group, right? But. Did I ever lead you to believe cooking would not be one of the job, I mean partner requirements?

ANNIE

No, I guess not. I just figured, we're well into the twenty-first century now, you know?

SEAN

Okay. Did you receive enough oversight and training to do the job effectively?

ANNIE

(snorts)

I suppose an orientation video would have helped. You know, fill me in on the culinary prerequisites.

SEAN

(to himself, taking notes)

Orientation - video-

ANNIE

Sean, that was a joke.

SEAN

No, no, this is good stuff. Very constructive. What would you improve about our dating environment?

ANNIE

It would be nice if you paid more attention to what I was drinking. Also, you're kinda cheap.

SEAN

I'm on a fixed income.

ANNIE

What are you, retired? No, you just come home with the second-cheapest bottle of booze the place has. If they had a bin full of dented wine, you'd be all over it.

SEAN

Maybe I'm just easygoing.

ANNIE

Maybe you're just undiscerning.

SEAN

Moving on. Did the relationship afford you sufficient opportunities for growth and advancement?

ANNIE

Advancement? What, like you popping the question or knocking me up? I guess the answer is no, but frankly I'm okay with that.

SEAN

What are my strongest attributes?

(looong pause.)

SEAN (cont.)

Annie?

ANNIE

You're punctual.

SEAN

That's it?

ANNIE

Punctuality is important. Also, um... very... hygienic. Mostly.

SEAN

Ah.

ANNIE

Well, sorry if I didn't come prepped with a litany of your virtues. Do you want to know why I'm breaking up with you?

SEAN

I'm getting there.

ANNIE

You're there now. Because we never talk.

SEAN

Talk? Sure we do. We're talking now. We've been talking for like an hour.

ANNIE

No, we've been chatting. The movie we just saw, what happened at work today -

SEAN

Oh, can I tell you what happened at work today -

ANNIE

No, you really can't. Emotions. Sean. Feelings. The actual fundamental interactions we have with one another. The words that lie beneath the surface of the daily crap we volley back and forth. Never comes up.

SEAN

Should it?

ANNIE

The unexamined relationship is not worth having.

SEAN

That's what I get for dating a philosophy major. Okay, but we're talking now, aren't we?

ANNIE

Too little, too late. Plus this whole concept is weirding me out. It's like our relationship was grant-funded and you're writing the final report.

SEAN

Maybe it was.

ANNIE

(snorts)

Then you could have afforded better booze.

SEAN

Touche. Was a single event responsible for your decision to leave?

ANNIE

No. Cumulative.

SEAN

A-ha! So there's no smoking gun.

ANNIE

A lot of times there isn't, Sean. You've just had so many chances to reach me, to say the right thing, to be beautiful or poetic or at least understanding, and you've failed every time. Words are important, Sean. They can let you into my heart if you choose the right ones. And they can slam the door if you don't.

(No response.)

ANNIE (cont.)

And there you go.

SEAN

Would you recommend dating me to your family and friends?

ANNIE

Geez. Survey says: Bzzzzzt! (Puts her arms up in the form of an X and makes Family Feud buzzer noise)

SEAN

(sighs)

Okay, let me just tally these up.

ANNIE

Tally? Tally what? What have you been doing.

SEAN

I ranked all of your answers from 0 to 5. It's called the Likert scale -

ANNIE

I know what the scale is, I was a sociology major. Not philosophy.

SEAN

But I thought that-

ANNIE

Try taking some better notes next time, Sean.

SEAN

Right. So, according to this, breaking up with me would be a bad idea. Wait. (Fixes something with pen.) A very bad idea.

ANNIE

Says who?

SEAN

Simple math. See, a 62. (He shows her the paper for a split-second.) Anything above 40, breaking up with me is a mistake. 60, a colossal mistake.

ANNIE

Bullshit. I thought the point of all this was to improve your performance for next time.

SEAN

It's formative as well as summative. Which means that-

ANNIE

(points at self, frustrated)

Me! Sociology major! Was this entire exercise just a facile attempt to keep me from dumping your ass?

SEAN

Did it work?

ANNIE

God. See for yourself.

(ANNIE stands up, puts on her coat.)

SEAN

One more. Do you have any tips to help me find a replacement?

ANNIE

Don't ask questions like that, for starters. Bye, Sean.

(She shakes her head and walks off stage left.)

SEAN

(shouting after her, reading off the paper)  
Thank you for your time. Best of luck in your next venture!

(SEAN watches her go, then sits back  
down and writes on the paper.

SEAN(cont.)

Words. Words, words, words.

(Blackout.)

Scene 2

(The same set. SEAN sits across from BARB.)

BARB

So what did you think of the film?

SEAN

It really made me think.

BARB

About what?

SEAN

About how fragile we are as people. The wispy, ephemeral line that separates us from the void. I was - stirred.

BARB

Wow. You got all that from a James Bond movie?

SEAN

What is this world but our elaborate underground lair, and who is Bond but the reaper that seeks surely after us all?

BARB

Jesus. I'm glad we didn't go see a Fellini or something. You'd never shut up.

SEAN

Can I get you another (he glances at his hand, which has a word scrawled on it) cosmopolitan, honey?

BARB

What's that on your hand?

SEAN

(gives her an awkward thumbs-up)

It's called a thumb.

BARB

Did you write the name of my drink on your hand?

SEAN

No, that's just, um, left over from my SAT's. Permanent marker, bad idea. Words, they cling to my soul.

BARB

Sure. Right. Listen, We need to talk.

SEAN

Of course. We always need to talk, for that is what lovers do.

BARB

*Talk.*

SEAN

Capital T?

BARB

Boldfaced and underlined.

SEAN

Dammit. All right, hold on. (He pulls out document.) "Thank you for your interest in Sean Taylor, and we are sorry to learn his affections do not suit your present needs. In order that Sean can offer superior service in the future, please take a few moments to fill out this brief survey."

BARB

What?

SEAN

Well, you want to break up with me, right?

BARB

(Pause.)

Yes I do.

SEAN

Then sorry, but this is standard operating procedure for grant funding. (He shrugs.) Hey, the NIH doesn't make the rules about these things.

BARB

The National Institutes of Health?

SEAN

Have been bankrolling our relationship, yes. You think I could afford our dates on a UPS driver's salary?

BARB

Frankly, yes. What interest does the NIH have in us?

SEAN

They're experimenting with ways to make a, like, healthy relationship.

BARB

Huh. I'm guessing we're the control group, then.

SEAN

May I?

BARB

Shoot. I'm fascinated.

SEAN

What was most satisfying about your time with me?

BARB

Sparky!

SEAN

Besides Sparky.

BARB

Um. Pass.

SEAN

No passing.

BARB

You're fun. Sometimes.

SEAN

Can you expound?

BARB

Like, you took me to see James Bond. And some of the silly stuff we've done, like go down to the fountain and scare all the tourists by arguing with each other in gibberish.

SEAN

(mock-argumentative)

Fadharly tashoot zong zong zaff!

BARB

Right. But not now. And the times we've gone dancing, those have been fun too.

SEAN

Do you want to dance with me right now?

BARB

No, I want to - I want to dump you. Quit changing the subject. Next question.

SEAN

Were your duties as girlfriend characterized correctly during the courting process?

BARB

We had a courting process?

SEAN,

You'd rather I call it seduction?

BARB

(pause)

Couldn't I just do this on, like, surveymonkey?

SEAN

This is a federal operation, Barb. The online version is targeted for launch in three to five years. And will only be available on Internet Explorer. Besides, I'd rather do it in person.

BARB

Why?

SEAN

Because it's important that we be open and honest with each other.

BARB

Huh.

SEAN

I'll just mark that answer a 'five.'

BARB

Is that good?

SEAN

Oh yes. Now, did you receive enough oversight and training to do the job effectively?

BARB

I'll admit, the orientation video caught me a little off-guard.

SEAN

Did you like that?

BARB

Well, the production values were fantastic.

SEAN

Thanks. I know a guy.

BARB

But it did seem a little, maybe, possessive. You know, 'I'd love to go out with you again, but please first watch this short film presentation outlining my requirements.'

SEAN

Would you have preferred a pamphlet? Perhaps a website?

ANNIE

That's somewhat beside the point.

SEAN

Why don't I just put a 'four' for that one. Now, what are my strongest attributes?

BARB

Abs, I'd say. Very firm.

SEAN

Not necessarily physical attributes.

BARB

(nods)

Yeah, I know. Abs. Very firm.

SEAN

Was a single event responsible for your decision to leave?

BARB

I'd say it was the discussions.

SEAN

That's more than one thing.

BARB

Okay. The discussion. Capital 'D.' The long, ongoing, flowery thing we keep having about the state of our emotions.

SEAN

Wait, you don't like that?

BARB

I'm an EMT, Sean. My job is draining. My life is draining. Sometimes I just want to go out with you and watch stuff blow up on a big screen and talk about nothing in particular. You know, chat. Not this constant re-evaluation of the state of things. Or all of the poetic language. I mean, sometimes you are such a chick.

SEAN

I'm so confused right now.

BARB

Anything else you want to ask me?

SEAN

No, let me just-. Yes. Okay. What was least satisfying about your time with me?

BARB

See above answer.

SEAN

That's it? Really? No dramatic personality flaws? Intolerable foibles? Foul odors?

BARB

Naw. Just too damn much openness and honesty.

SEAN

Would you recommend dating me to your family and friends?

BARB

Family, no. Friends, some. But I'm not giving you any names!

SEAN

Okay. Let me add these up. (Does some figures.) They're on the Likert Scale.

BARB

What's that?

SEAN

Really? I thought you were a sociology major.

BARB

Philosophy.

SEAN

(winging it)

Dammit. Anyway. You got an - eighteen.

BARB

Which means?

SEAN

It means that - 40 or below means you shouldn't break up with me. 20 or below, breaking up with me would be a horrible mistake that will haunt you until your dying day, and, depending on your particular belief in the afterlife, potentially long afterwards.

BARB

Are you making this up?

SEAN

Of course not.

BARB

Because it sounds like this whole enterprise is just a last-ditch attempt to get me to reconsider.

SEAN

Nope. Scientifically sound, proven method for improving my dating technique for future romantic scenarios.

BARB

So you're okay with me breaking up with you?

SEAN

The question should be, are you okay with breaking up with me? This is science. The numbers don't lie.

BARB

Well, according to my polling data, one hundred percent of respondents believe you're making this up.

SEAN

If I wanted you to stay, don't you think I would just ask?

BARB

Why don't you?

SEAN

Oh. Okay. I want you to stay. I really like you and I wanted this to work and I thought this would be a way to do it.

BARB

By lying to me?

SEAN

I guess you could put it that way.

BARB

And in case you haven't noticed, constant probing questions are the reason we're having this discussion to begin with.

SEAN

Then what do I need to do?

BARB

(shrugs)

Sorry, Sean. Sounds like you need to collate some of that data.

SEAN

So that's it, then?

BARB

See you around. Best of luck in your next venture.

(BARB gets up to leave.)

SEAN

Hold on. So would you recommend me to your - aw, forget it. Take care of yourself.

(BARB exits. SEAN crumples up the survey. Blackout.)

SCENE 3

(SEAN sits across from CINDY.)

CINDY

You really like coming to this place, don't you?

SEAN

Good beer.

CINDY

Speaking of which, do you want another? You were having a Guinness, right?

SEAN

Newcastle. And no thanks.

CINDY

Oh. Well, same country anyway.

SEAN

-ish.

CINDY

So what did you think of the movie?

SEAN

(shrugs)

It was all right.

CINDY

That's all you have to say? Just all right?

SEAN

Okay. It was a profound and trenchant exploration of the existential vacuum engendered in a world cruelly stripped of a godhead.

CINDY

Wow, hon. Pretty sure no one has ever said that before about a movie with Channing Tatum in it.

SEAN

You asked. Do you want to talk about it or chat about it?

CINDY

I didn't know there was a distinction.

SEAN

Oh my yes. Like right now, I want to talk.

CINDY

Okay.

SEAN

That is to say, We Need To Talk.

CINDY

Oh.

SEAN

I don't think we should see each other anymore.

CINDY

Really? Why not?

SEAN

I don't know what you want.

CINDY

I want you to be sweet and kind and funny and wise.

SEAN

I don't know what you want that I can actually do.

CINDY

You're doing fine.

SEAN

I'm not. I just don't know how to summon up the mental energy for a relationship with you. It's work. Always trying to guess what you want to hear from me.

CINDY

Is it really that bad?

SEAN

I think I'm just tired of not being myself.

CINDY

So be yourself.

SEAN

Not sure I remember how. Sorry. Right now I'm thinking of just throwing in the towel on the entire notion of courtship.

CINDY

Are you sure? So that's it then?

SEAN

Yeah.

CINDY

Damn. Okay. Hold on a minute.

(CINDY pulls out some sheets of paper and a pen.)

SEAN

What the hell is that?

CINDY

Exit survey. Standard operating procedure.

SEAN

(bemused)

Is it now.

CINDY

Well, our relationship was partially underwritten by the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

SEAN

Really. The USDA?

CINDY

Sure. Why do you think I always had so many fresh vegetables?

SEAN

I figured farmer's market.

CINDY

Nope, research subsidies. So, "Thank you for your interest in Cynthia Peters, and we are sorry to learn her affections do not suit your present needs."

(SEAN begins to recite in chorus.)

CINDY and SEAN

"In order that Cynthia can offer superior service in the future, please take a few moments to fill out this brief survey."

CINDY

You're done this before.

SEAN

I am familiar with the concept.

CINDY

Then you know the drill.

SEAN

Very much so.

CINDY

So. What was most satisfying about your time with me?

SEAN

I'm tempted to say your cat. But, the brownies.

CINDY

The brownies?

SEAN

Yeah. Remember you made them with some kind of caramel, and frosting that was like an inch thick?

CINDY

That's all you got?

SEAN

They were really good brownies. And I remember, they were a surprise. For my birthday.

CINDY

(smiles)

Because you said you didn't want a cake. I got around that one, didn't I?

SEAN

Thanks for that.

CINDY

I figured just because you wanted me to ignore your birthday didn't mean you wanted me to, you know, ignore your birthday.

SEAN

Well played.

CINDY

So were your duties as boyfriend characterized correctly during the courting process?

SEAN

I would note that I showed you a very nice video. There was no such action on your part.

CINDY

Mine's still in pre-production.

SEAN

Really?

CINDY

Yeah, my friend Barb knows a guy. So did you receive enough oversight and training to do the job effectively?

SEAN

Yes.

CINDY

Yes?

SEAN

Yes. Go ahead and mark a five there.

CINDY

How did you know I was doing this on the Likert Scale?

SEAN

Hunch.

CINDY

What would you improve about our dating environment?

SEAN

I wish you would tell me what you want.

CINDY

You mean now?

SEAN

I mean, period. I have dated women who I have found almost indistinguishable on the outside, Cindy. Same background, same profession, same habits. And one of them just wants to cuddle, and the other reaches under the bed and pulls out the fuzzy handcuffs and ball gag.

CINDY

That sounds like fun.

SEAN

Which one?

CINDY

Yes.

SEAN

Anyway. I have tried to be myself and it doesn't work. I have tried to be someone else entirely and it doesn't work. I have concocted elaborate lies (gives a knowing stare) to try to convince women not to break up with me.

CINDY

Oh.

SEAN

And I have tried, finally, to be a blank slate upon which the girlfriend can project whatever image of me she wants. And none of it's worked.

CINDY

A tabula rasa?

SEAN

Yes. That thing you said.

CINDY

Which one of those are you now?

SEAN

The latter, I guess.

CINDY

I never realized that you put so much thought into it. That you had so much of a strategy for these things.

SEAN

It has evolved over many a year. And anyway, look who's talking.

CINDY

What do you mean?

SEAN

The USDA? Seriously?

CINDY

Sure. I've been, um, monitoring your caloric intake on our dates and making notes on its effect on our relationship.

SEAN

Any interesting conclusions thus far?

CINDY

We're happier with more beer.

SEAN

Our tax dollars at work. So where'd you really get the idea for the survey?

CINDY

I don't know what you mean.

SEAN

Cindy.

CINDY

Okay. Some guy tried it on Barb a few months ago.

SEAN

Sounds like a clever fella. So did you google "exit interview" and go with the first hit?

CINDY

Pretty much.

SEAN

And the next question is, what are your strongest attributes?

CINDY

Yeah.

SEAN

(smiles)

And the answer is that you are, apparently, exactly as cluelessly devious as I am.

CINDY

Is that good?

SEAN

It's a shame the scale only goes to five.

CINDY

Five it is.

SEAN

Now a question for you: What are *my* strongest attributes?

CINDY

This is highly irregular.

SEAN

Go with it.

CINDY

You're sweet and kind and funny and wise.

SEAN

Be honest.

CINDY

Okay. You've figured me out.

SEAN

That's not an attribute.

CINDY

You have proven yourself capable of figuring me out.

SEAN

Really? I have?

CINDY

You saw right through this survey.

SEAN

I had inside information.

CINDY

Nonetheless. Sean, you're doing fine. You don't need to try so hard.

SEAN

So you say. What score did I get?

CINDY

Oh. Um, three hundred seven.

SEAN

(laughs)

You're a terrible liar.

CINDY

Yeah.

SEAN

(Pause)

But you do tell some wonderful lies.

CINDY

Um ... so was a single event responsible for your decision to leave?

SEAN

Wow.

CINDY

What?

SEAN

Okay, maybe you're slightly more clueless than I am. Just add a "not" to that question, and I can give you an answer.

CINDY

(studying sheet)

Was a single event not responsible for your decision to leave?

SEAN  
(parsing out in head)  
I don't - I. I was trying to say that - why don't I take  
you up on that next beer.

CINDY  
(smiles)  
Are you sure?

SEAN  
Five.

CINDY  
What'll you have?

(SEAN grabs the pen and writes  
something on CINDY's hand. She reads.)

CINDY  
Newcastle?

SEAN  
You read my mind.

(BLACKOUT. End of play.)