



EXIT

BY

TOM FALATER

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

I would compare Thomas Falater's, "Exit," to the later days of Bukowski, writing dirty stories out the memories of experience, or Denis Johnson's grime-of-Americana, or Philip Ó Ceallaigh's Notes from a Turkish Whorehouse – I might even toss in some Dark Laughter from Sherwood Anderson. There is an oily rainbow that spreads over these words, an infection of mosquitos in stagnate waters, the crunch of a bug while you walk through the alley.

While I think the storyline is a tad cliché and the depth of character can be developed, I see a writer who fights for the hard line. I want down-on-their-luck characters to experience love and lose it or have had it and never realize it was their own goddamn fault, their inimitable sadness, like a forlorn dog, is a trait I think that anyone can connect to – hence the reason I write.

Falater has created a character that you want to win, but you know that won't, a man who has fucked up his life so much that, even though he has the intelligence to know his own culpability, would rather writhe in the muck, a man you can root for and hate at the same time.

In this story I see an author developing a style, a line that has beauty and dirt, a man that should continue to write.

You may have read a similar story, but you haven't read Falater's unique voice.

Enjoy.

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

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"You would if you had to," she said quietly, as if to herself.

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Exit

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There is no better place to slum than a cheap strip club in the middle of the desert between Las Vegas and San Diego. From the highway, I saw a large, wooden cowboy with an animated arm pointing toward the entrance and I knew I had to stop, if only for the adventure of it all. As I parked, I heard disco music booming through the block walls of the club, still hot from the day's

sun. The bouncer at the door gave me a nod as I walked inside. To him, I was just another sucker looking for something that didn't exist in the worst possible place.

The club smelled like moldy carpet and the air coated my lungs with thirty years of stale cigarette smoke, spilled liquor, and cheap cleaning spray. You never forget the smell of a place like this, it stays with you forever. Vinyl chairs surrounded the stage, and booths with tables lined the walls. In strip clubs, perverts and hard-core voyeurs sit near the stage while guys like me sit in the booths so we can pretend we don't belong. There were only a few other men in the club, two men by the stage and some others in the booths getting lap dances. The dancer on the stage stared at the ceiling, swaying back and forth to the music, looking lazy, bored, and high. All the women in the club were old, used, and ragged. I imagined that they came from broken pasts, bad choices, and bad families, and they were now marooned in the desert to sell the only thing they had left.

I sat in a booth and an older woman in a bikini came to my table. "Can I get you a drink, hun?"

"Rum and Coke, please," I replied. She wobbled away in high heels to get my drink. As I waited, I looked around the club and thought it might have been a mistake to stop here. The club was dark and depressing as if the owners didn't care anymore. It was one step away from becoming another abandoned desert building with no windows or doors and walls covered with graffiti.

The bikini woman came back with my drink. "Here you go, hun. I think you'll like the next dancer. She's special." I smiled at her but knew it was just a silly line they tell all the men who come here.

The stage lights dimmed and the music changed to slow jazz as the next dancer curled her legs around the edge of the curtains the way a snake slithers around a pole. She was tall and elegant and her skin was bright in the lights of the stage. When she turned, her back arched against the tattered curtains like a cheap, Mexican painting and I was quickly lost in the beautiful decadence of it all.

For the first time, I was glad that I stopped here. My interest must have been obvious because the bikini woman returned. "Would you like her to come to your table?"

"Yes," I replied, "of course." I liked the way she looked, the way she moved, everything about her. I sat back and enjoyed the feeling of anticipation.

The bouncer came to my table, standing between me and the stage. "Let me give you the rules of the club," he began, enjoying his authority. "No touching of the ladies. Two-drink minimum. If a lady sits at your table, you buy her a drink and you tip your server. No funny business in the club."

"You forgot to tell me not to spit on the floor." I hate bullies like him. His face went blank for a moment, he smirked, and then walked away. I couldn't tell if my sarcasm went over his head or if he wanted to throw me out. Either way, I was happy to see him go.

The music faded and the dancer finished her act. Funny how a woman taking her clothes off could become a show with a beginning, middle, and an end. She came out of the backroom and directly to my table. She did not wobble as she walked; she was smooth, graceful, and confident. She wore a red, silk camisole and somehow -- despite the surroundings -- she looked innocent and pure.

When she arrived, the bikini woman came to take our drink orders. "What can I get you two? Another one?"

"Yes, sure," I replied. I remembered the bouncer's two-drink requirement.

We both looked at the dancer. "I'll have what he's having," she said. Standard response for a strip club, I thought. They'll probably bring her a watered-down soda and charge me full price.

She crossed her legs, put her elbows on the table, and leaned closer to me. There was an awkward moment of silence. "I know you're not nervous. Why are you so quiet?" she asked.

You danced very well. Not like the other girls." I didn't know what else to say.

"Thank you. Most people don't notice. They're not looking at my dancing." She paused. "Is this your first strip club?"

"No, not my first but I don't come to them very often."

"When do you come to them?" she mused. "When you're horny?"

"No, not when I'm horny." My answer surprised me. "I guess I come here when I'm..." I paused. I was going to say lonely but stopped myself. "Bored."

"And how often do you get bored?"

"Oh, I don't know. Seems like my whole life is boring." I didn't like the way the conversation was going. "Tell me about yourself."

"Nice girl like me in a place like this? That sort of thing?" she teased. "I just like to dance. Be noticed. It's a fun way to make money. I'm always interested in making a little extra money."

"Aren't you ever worried? A lot of creepy people must come in here."

"Oh, I always carry a little protection. I can take care of myself."

The bikini woman came back with our drinks. "Here you go." She turned to me and winked. "I see you got the best girl. Good for you, hun." It was corny but cute. I liked it.

I looked at the dancer. "What makes you the best girl?"

She was amused. “Well, don’t you like what you see?”

“I sure do!” I replied.

“Well, that makes me the best girl.” She laughed at her own answer. “What kind of work do you do?”

“I’m an architect.”

“Oh, that’s impressive. Big projects?”

“Yes, my firm is working on the new art museum in Los Angeles.” I wanted to show off and it was working on her. She seemed to be genuinely impressed with my position.

She motioned to the bouncer. “I won’t be dancing anymore tonight, Lenny.” He nodded to her and quickly disappeared to the back of the club.

Did that mean she was done for the night or did she make up her mind she was going to leave with me? “That’s a shame. I was hoping to see you dance some more.”

“I’m sure we can move on to other things besides dancing,” she said.

I was relieved I wasn’t wasting my time. “I’m glad you’re going to stay with me. What’s your name anyway?”

“I’m Jackie. What’s yours?”

“Michael.”

Jackie leaned closer. “So, you’re Michael, the bored architect just passing through. Tell me more.”

“I’m single. Divorced a couple years ago.”

“Oh? Did she take everything you own?” she asked playfully, half smiling.

“No, not everything. Her family is well-off and she didn’t need it. She did take the kids though.”

“So, you still have the big house, pool, fancy car and all that?”

“Yes, I still do,” I replied, knowing it would impress her. Now was my chance to ask for something more than just a drink. “How about a lap dance I see the other guys getting?”

“Oh, I think you can skip your lap dance.” She smiled. “There’s a little hotel nearby. The club keeps a room for us and we could go there. Get to know each other.”

I was excited. “Yes, I would like that.”

Jackie smiled. “I’ll go change. I’ll be right back.” She got up and went to the back of the club.

I paid for the drinks and left a good tip. Jackie came back later wearing jean shorts, boots, and a flannel top. She looked more like a small-town western girl than a stripper from a nightclub. We left together. I was happy to get out of the club and into the fresh, night air.

She told me to drive to a back road behind the club. The moon was bright enough to make everything look black, white, and gray at the same time. Even the road stretched before us like a glowing, silver trail. The desert is beautiful at night, empty, still, and calm. Wind rushed through the open window as I drove, surrounding me with hot, dry air, reminding me I was trespassing and didn’t belong. I kept telling myself I was just passing through.

Jackie looked at me. “Why are you out here in the desert?”

“There was a conference in Vegas I went to. Building materials, standards, stuff like that. Boring stuff.”

“Is that why you were bored and came to the club?”

“I didn’t want to go home right away. There’s nothing for me there anymore. I thought I would stop and pass some time.”

Railroad warning lights flashed and gates closed, blocking the road ahead of us. I stopped the car and felt the ground rumble beneath us.

“Damn, that’s the cattle train,” Jackie said. “It will take forever.”

“What’s that?”

“Every week, they round up the cattle from the ranches north of here and take them to the slaughterhouse just outside of town.”

As the train passed, the weight of its engines shook our seats and the cattle cars rattled and banged against each other, straining to break free.

“I bet the cows are all trying to escape,” I said, trying to joke with her.

“They don’t know what’s happening. For all they know, they’re going to another ranch.”

“Yeah, but their instinct is telling them to jump. Look at the way they push against the doors. I wonder what they’re going to think when they reach the end of the line and realize what happened to them.”

“They’ll realize they were a sucker and they shouldn’t have gotten on the train in the first place.”

“I’d hate to be the one at the slaughterhouse who has to kill them,” I said.

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“I wouldn’t want to live that way, not feeling anything.”

“You would if you had to,” she said quietly, as if to herself.

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As we drove, a feeling of dread came over me and I knew what would happen. It always happens the same way. I’d give her a few hundred dollars, she takes off her clothes, and I go through the motions of having sex. When we’re done, I’d feel more empty and lonely than when I began.

I don’t know why I keep doing this to myself. I should have never taken the exit in the first place. I didn’t want to treat her that way. I had to tell her. “Look, this might have been a bad idea. How about if I take you back to the club and I go home?”

She didn’t seem surprised by what I said. “We could do that but the bouncer saw us leave together. I have to return with some money.”

“I’ll just pay you anyway.”

She turned to me and put her hand on my leg. “Why don’t we just go to the room and have a couple drinks? We can talk. Just talk. You look like you could use a break.”

I thought for a moment. Maybe she was right. There’s no harm in just having a drink together. I put my hand on her hand. “Okay, that’ll be fun.” I smiled and we kept driving, leaving the club, the train, and my doubts behind us.

The hotel was just beyond a long curve in the road. I saw a cheap sign on top of a trailer by the curb advertising the rooms for \$59 a night including air conditioning and cable television. Some of the letters were missing and the trailer’s tire was flat, this town has a lot of cheap, broken-down signs. I pulled in and noticed two other cars where there, probably the manager and someone else.

“It’s the one on the end,” she said, pointing to the corner of the building away from the office.

When I turned toward the room, I saw the curtains in the window move. It could have been a breeze but I wasn’t sure. “What was that? The curtains moved.”

“I must have left the air conditioner on or something.” She put her hand on my leg again. “I’m sure we’ll be fine.”

I parked the car in front of the room and when we got out she stopped to fumble through her purse for the key. It was quiet in front of the hotel and along the desert road. The only sound we heard was the constant popping of moths crashing into the tungsten light above our heads.

Some moths circled around the light in a blind frenzy while others slammed directly into the bulb, overwhelmed by its allure, their bodies fell to the ground and made a small pile beside the door. Jackie released the lock but before she opened the door she turned to me and looked into my eyes. I thought she was going to kiss me but something distracted her when it fell on my shoulder. She brushed it off with her hand.

“You have a dead moth on you, silly.” She was smiling. I hugged her and felt better. I was happy I came.

She opened the door and I walked in first. Immediately, I was pushed hard from behind and fell face-down on the bed.

Jackie was thrown across the room and slammed against the back wall. I rolled over on the bed just as the lights turned on. A man stood over the bed holding a gun aimed at us both.

I looked back at Jackie. She was on the floor in the corner and another man was tied to a chair beside her. He was gagged and his face was red and swollen. Blood dripped from the side of his head and his wrists were red from struggling against the ropes. I recognized him; he was the bouncer from the club.

“Hands up! Show me your fucking hands!” the man with the gun yelled.

I put my hands in front of me. My mind was racing, trying to figure out what was happening so fast.

He pointed the gun at Jackie.

“Get your hands up, bitch.” He was tall, menacing and angry. “You don’t remember me, do you bitch? No, you fucking don’t. You don’t, do you? But I sure remember you. Oh yeah, you’re the bitch who ripped me off and ruined my life. You took everything.” He turned to me. “Who the fuck are you?”

“I’m Michael. We just met at the bar. I was driving back—”

“Shut the fuck up!” He shook his gun at me recklessly. I flinched, afraid that it would go off. “Oh Jackie, you found another one, didn’t you? I wasn’t enough?”

Jackie’s voice shook. “Look, we can work it out. Whatever it is.”

The man laughed. "He's the new sucker, isn't he? You got yourself a new sucker."

"I just met her at the club. I wasn't going to do anything. Just talk," I said.

He laughed even more. "Oh, you weren't? Let me guess. Because she's different. Not like the others. Did you fall in love with her? Are you going to marry her and live in a little pink house? That's her trick, you know. You stupid, fucking idiot."

"Please, I had to do what I had to do," Jackie said.

"Shut the fuck up, bitch." He looked back at me. "You know what they do, pal? They're going to take all your money. They're going to take your wallet, they're going to take your credit cards, they're going to take your bank account, and they're going to take your fucking car. They left me here with only the clothes on my back. I had to call my wife and guess what? She left me and took my kids too. I owe it all to this bitch."

"Look, I'm not a part of this. Why don't you call the police and turn them in?"

"And tell them what? I fucked a whore and she stole my money? Is that going to get my life back?" He grabbed me and forced me to turn face down on the bed. "Why don't you shut up, lover boy?"

The bouncer looked at Jackie, who was slowly reaching into her purse. The man jabbed his gun into my back.

"How about you first, lover boy?" I closed my eyes and tried to sink into the bed, hoping I would not get shot.

Jackie pulled a gun from her purse and shot again and again at the man. The noise was deafening. The man fell against the window and grabbed the curtains to hold himself up just long enough to return fire.

The bullets flew over my head. Two hit the bouncer's chest and one hit Jackie. She fell back and splattered blood against the wall. Struggling to stay alive, Jackie raised her arm and fired two more times at the man before she collapsed to the floor and dropped the gun beside her.

It was over quickly and suddenly the room was quiet. The bouncer was dead. Jackie was dead. And the man behind me was dead. He fell to the floor and took the curtains down with him.

I rolled off the bed. Blood dripped from my clothes. I wasn't sure if I was shot. I didn't feel any pain.

I had to get out of there. The room was filled with smoke and the smell of gunfire and blood.

I cracked open the door and looked out, the lot was empty and still, even the moths had flown away. It was eerily quiet. I left the room, got into my car, and drove slowly away into the night.

I felt myself growing faint and darkness spread in front of me. Blood dripped from my chest and I realized I had been shot.

But I didn't want to fight it anymore. I was tired of running, tired of searching, tired of taking exits in the middle of nowhere. My heart was broken years ago, and I've just been a walking ghost ever since. I didn't want to go to any more strip clubs, meet any more strippers, or go where I didn't belong.

I knew it was my time to leave. I took my foot off the gas to let the car roll slowly away from the hotel. My hands fell from the wheel and I felt the warm, desert air surround my soul for the last time.

END

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *Exit is about the loneliness and isolation men feel when they are no longer needed and the people who exploit them.*

AUTHOR BIO: Tom is a freelance writer from Southern California. His most recent work appeared in 'The Yard, Crime Blog', 'The Chamber Magazine', and '50-Word Stories'. He can be reached at thomasfalater.com