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## Exit one

S G Collins

The taxi trunk pops open and Julian grabs his bags. The rain is blinding him, cascading over the brim of his hat. It's the kind of rain that overwhelms storm sewers just as an overture. Whatever mercy the skies showed him this evening (in the end his flight was *not* diverted to Montreal) has since been taken away. In the wake of the departing taxi he looks left and right for a shallow route to the curb, finds none, and steps right through the puddle. "Fuck," he says as the water chills his ankles. In his position he's not in a habit of cursing in public, but no one can hear him over this thunder. Those shoes cost him over three hundred dollars.

He pulls open the old glass doors between the storefronts, trudges up two flights and turns left. Rainwater pools around his ruined shoes as he fishes out the key to his office at the end of the hall. But wait, the door is still unlocked. INSTITUTE FOR FREEDOM OF THOUGHT — OULIAN CODY, PH.D., says the gold-leaf lettering on frosted glass. Through the unfrosted border he sees a woman's figure on one of the comfy reception chairs. And wonders why Miriam is working late.

"Hey beautiful," he says on the way to the coat rack.

"Hi," says a voice he has never heard.

He turns. The white girl sitting there has a striking, you might say beautiful, but completely gloomy look. He waits for her to explain herself, but she just puts aside the travel magazine and looks at him between dark wet curls.

"Can I uh, help you with anything? Or did you just come in to get out of the rain?"

"Miriam said I could wait."

"Ah."

He puts his bags down beside the coat rack, puts his hat on the rack, and starts to remove his raincoat. There's a blue raincoat hanging there already, must belong to the kid. As he hangs his own coat, he casually smells the blue one. He can usually tell a lot about someone's psychology from the way they smell. But the blue raincoat divulges no secrets.

"Can I get you a coffee?"

"There is no coffee here," the girl says.

He looks at her again.

"That's why she went out, I think."

"So Miriam just went out and left you here alone?"

"Yes."

"In my office."

"I think she likes me."

"Right, of course. What's not to like. Listen, I uh, I have to —"

He swallows. She looks at him.

"Excuse me, I'll be right back."

The tall black middle-aged man with the baritone voice has disappeared into the little washroom. Lily watches the door for a moment. He's not what she expected. What did she expect? Maybe someone shrill, a quack, a squeaky oily ambulance-chaser. Not one so fatherly and self-possessed.

She turns a page of the magazine. A beautiful woman is relaxing on a beach in Puerto Vallarta. Lily is instructed to GET AWAY FROM IT ALL. The rain is battering the windows across the office. Another rumble of

thunder. Her despair comes back, she feels her face uncontrollably clenching into a knot. Her whole body folds over in a great slow wave of sobbing. She hears the toilet flush.

Julian washes his face and dries it with a towel. He looks at himself in the mirror. Opens his eyes wide, blinks twice. He opens the door.

The girl is standing beside Miriam's desk, where there's a box of Kleenex. She blows her nose. Julian smiles.

"Did, uh, Miriam say when she'd be back?"

"No."

He moves to his desk and looks at some of the message slips lying there. His visitor sits against the edge of Miriam's desk, staring at the two goldfish in the aquarium on the file cabinet. She seems to have been crying.

"You a friend of Miriam's then?" Julian asks her.

"Not really."

Julian clears his throat just a bit. "Not to be inquisitive, but what are you actually waiting *for*?"

"You."

Her head tips just a notch, but he can't see her face.

"Me."

"Would you be Julian Cody?"

"Yes. Yes, I would be Julian Cody. Who would you be?"

"My name's Lily? Palomar? Lily Palomar?" She turns to him then, as if he knows the answer to the question.

Julian looks at his watch, then comes forward and offers his hand. Lily puts down the crumpled tissue, brushes her hand on her pants, and shakes his hand.

"What can I help you with, Miss Palomar?"

A faint smile comes to the girl's lips as she studies his undone necktie.

"You're what they call an exit counselor," she says.

"That's correct."

"I mean you help people escape from weird religions."

The simplification makes him smile. He nods. "I do intervention. I write, I lecture, I do expert witness testimony."

He takes a deep breath, but can't catch her scent before she returns to the comfy chair by the door. He moves back to his desk.

"Did Miriam tell you we don't usually take walk-ins?"

"No."

"Tell you the truth, we're actually not taking any new clients at the moment. Is this uh, an emergency, somebody you're worried about? Girlfriend, loved one, mom, dad?"

There are four pink while-you-were-outs. He picks up a notice from the electric company. Scheduled power outage.

"I have a question. Is this the whole thing?"

She has one of his little tri-fold brochures open in her hand. She gestures to the room.

"I mean the Institute for Freedom of Thought. This is it? This room?"

"Well we have a network of advisory members around the country. We do most of our work in the field."

She's still looking at him.

"Yeah, this is it," he says.

"So these desks, this furniture, that fishtank, the bookshelf, you're the 'executive director' of all this."

"What's your point?"

She looks down at the carpet.

"Freedom of thought. I liked the sound of the name."

She puts the brochure down.

"I'm scared. You know. Somehow I got myself mixed up in some kinda bizarre thing."

"So you're here about yourself."

"Yes."

"You've been involved in a destructive spiritual group."

"Yes."

"And now you've made a choice to leave it."

"Yes."

"On your own."

"Yes."

"Congratulations." He opens his hands. "You've done the hard work. What do you need me for?"

"You're an exit counselor. I need an exit. I'm lookin for the exit and I can't find it."

"Well for one thing, my schedule's pretty jammed up —"

She nods. "Miriam told me. You're going to play golf in West Palm."

His necktie is already loose. He pulls it the rest of the way off, and sits down in his oak swivel chair behind his desk near the front window. Glances at the wall clock above the goldfish. It's quarter to seven.

"Okay, Miss what was it?"

"Lily Palomar."

"Lily Palomar, my point is, what you're talking about really isn't the work I do. My work is rescue-oriented. I reach people who can't be reached and help them get to where you're at. You're strong. You don't need me. I'm not your man."

"I was afraid you were gonna say that." She reaches for her purse.

"Now that's not to say I can't help you find help." Julian turns away, grabs his desk phone and starts flipping through his old Rolodex. "I can make a call right now and set you up with one of my colleagues. She's a

distinguished psychologist, very sensitive and very good, and she works with people in post-exit trauma what the shit *Jesus Christ*."

Lily is by his side, aiming a handgun toward his left eye.

"Put down the phone, Doctor Cody."

"Okay, careful with that, all right?" He puts the phone down.

Lily turns him around in his chair and cozies up behind him, keeping the gun leveled at his temple. Julian's been in a lot of confrontational situations in his career. So far he's never been shot, even accidentally. He forces himself to breathe slowly.

"Nobody wants to talk to me," she says. "They all think I'm crazy."

"Really," says Julian.

"Okay the first two counselors I see turn out to be these evangelical outreach types? What they do is share the true gospel with lost souls in aberrational Christian cults, and drag them back into the mainstream cult. Not quite what I was looking for. So I go to this lady Vilma with a German accent, wears a lot of tie-dyes? And she wanted to give me deep-breathing lessons for a hundred fifty an hour. Not quite what I was looking for. Then I go to this Hair-Club-for-Men dropout who kept staring at my boobs the whole time I was talking to him, and he ... wasn't *quite* what I was looking for but *you* —"

With her free hand she pats him gently on the head.

"I think you might be what I'm looking for."

Lily straightens up and leans against the radiator under the window.

"Anyway I'm plumb out of options now, so it's like you Tarzan, me desperate lunatic. Okay?"

"Okay. Is that thing loaded?"

"I think it's loaded."

"Yeah do me a favor and be extra careful with that, okay? I just had these carpets cleaned."

She smiles. "I will."

"So you made it, finally!" It's Miriam plunging through the door, shaking off raindrops, holding a collapsed umbrella and a plastic grocery bag from Shaw's. She puts the bag down. "I was getting a little — worried about you." Her eyes widen.

Julian looks at the handgun pointed at him, then looks back at Miriam.

"Miriam Karris, managing director of the Institute for Freedom of Thought, I'd like you to meet Miss Palomar? Our new client?"

"You guys can call me Lily."

The coffee machine on the counter is sputtering and wheezing. Two curly desk-phone cords are twisting in Lily's left hand like a rosary. Julian's mobile phone is in the aquarium with the goldfish.

"How do you take it?" Miriam asks.

"Cream," says Lily.

He is sitting beside Miriam on the sofa. He takes a sip, puts his mug down on the coffee table and opens his notebook.

"So there's no formal name for this group."

Lily is across from them in the comfy chair. "Nope."

"Do they have some informal name for themselves, a way to distinguish the, uh, chosen ones from the unclean, anything like that?"

Lily seems to puzzle over that one.

"It just helps to have a way to refer —"

"Society? Our society? I dunno."

"Our Society." He makes a note of it, looks at Miriam. Miriam shakes her head.

"Doesn't ring a bell. I can check the database, once we get back on line." She looks at the two phone cords now draped over Lily's shoulders.

"I don't think you're gonna find it. I mean nobody really recognizes this thing."

"But it is a religion."

"Absolutely."

"And not a splinter group?" Miriam squints. "Is it connected with any orthodox —"

"Christian, Buddhist, Hindu?"

"Nope," Lily says.

Julian leans forward a bit. "Do they have, uh, where they live, is it some sort of compound, a farm, a cabin in the woods or ..."

Lily laughs. "It's not like that at all."

"But it's a small group? What, a couple dozen maybe —"

The young white girl's eyes widen. "Oh no. This is not a small group. Doctor Cody, we're talking about a very, very big ... society."

Julian chuckles now and glances at Miriam again.

"What?" Lily says.

"Well. Miss Palomar. Lily. It's just kinda hard to believe, after researching new religions for sixteen years, that there's really a whole *major* cult out there that we've heard nothing about."

Lily nods. "Scary, isn't it."

"And you say they use mind-control on the believers."

"Oh God. These people are so brainwashed, you wouldn't believe what they believe. They believe stuff that doesn't make any sense. They're not even aware of what they do believe. It's like a blind spot to them. It's like they have to blind themselves to believe what they have to

believe, because if they stop believing it they know all hell's gonna break loose."

"I'm having trouble following you."

"Me too," says Miriam.

Lily darkens. "You wanna know what they do? I'll tell you one thing. This is sick." Bracing herself. "They take pictures of dead people. And put them on little bits of paper. And they use those slips of paper as a medium of exchange."

Julian glances at Miriam. She's squinting too. Neither of them has ever encountered this.

"To buy and sell things?"

"Yes!" She expels a breath as if she's just sniffed a corpse herself, and hunches her shoulders to quell the shivering.

Miriam touches the tip of her left ring finger to her tongue, the way she does sometimes when she's trying to think of an answer. "Do you think there are people being hurt in this ... society?"

Unhesitating. "I think there are people being hurt all the time in this society. People are being emotionally and physically abused, people deprived of their freedom. Literally! There are people being taken out of circulation and shoved into little rooms, and you never, hear from them, again."

"Oh my God," Miriam whispers.

"And I'm not kidding, this is really happening. It's really happening."

She breaks off and looks away, her face pinching.

Julian sits back straight, lets his eyes drift away from Lily for a moment. "Lily, this is, uh. This is some very serious stuff here. People are being held against their will, people being abused. Don't you think we need to notify the authorities about —"

"What, the police? The judges? You don't think they're in on it too?"  
She puffs, as if to say *you poor naïve bastard*.

"Well. Lily now you're starting to sound paranoid, okay."

She turns and aims the gun right at Julian's face.

"See? Nobody believes me! Nobody believes a word I'm saying!"

"Lily. Lily. I believe you."

She sits forward and brings the gun closer. "No you don't."

"I believe you, really I do! Lily. I believe you!"

And she smiles. "Huh. Maybe that's how it works. They put a gun to your head and suddenly you believe."

She seems to have had a satori. She takes the gun away from Julian's face and lolls back in her chair, laughing like a loose garden hose.

Julian glances both ways like he's about to cross a busy street. Then he lurches.

"Julian!"

And grabs the gun out of Lily's hand.

He stands up, aiming the gun at Lily.

"You. Little, affluent, suburban asswipe. You're looking for an exit? There's one right there." He nods to the door. "Now you get outa here. I mean it!"

He grabs the blue raincoat from the coat rack, and throws it into Lily's lap.

"Here. Go. I want you out of my office *now*."

Miriam's voice is too calm. "Julian, cut it out."

"She's playing with us, don't you see that? Don't you see?"

At which moment the room goes dark.

In the shadow Lily's voice is small, but oddly soothing.

"Doctor, you don't think I'd come in here and threaten you with a loaded gun, do you? I'm a nonviolent person."

"What the hell is going *on* around here!" Julian shouts.

"I left the notice on your desk," Miriam says. "It's Edison, they're replacing a transformer somewhere."

"In this weather? That's crazy."

"It may be crazy, but it is on schedule."

Julian moves to put the gun down on Miriam's desk. There's one slice of light from somewhere in the next block. Miriam stands up into the glow, and turns to face him.

"Julian? This girl asked for our help. It's an ethics thing now. We've been here before, we know what to do. We can't not do it."

Julian crosses to the windows over the street. He sits down at his desk and opens the bottom drawer. He takes out a small fluorescent lantern, flicks it on, and puts it down on the desktop blotter. The light is the same color as the lightning outside, but softer.

Lily is standing beside him again. Her hand is on the rainy glass. Bits of fog around her fingertips.

"All I'm looking for is a way out of this mess."

"What do you think it's gonna take?" he asks her.

She shakes her head. "They want me to believe there's nowhere else to go. And I don't wanna believe that."

"Then don't. Don't believe."

"But what if they're right?" She looks at him. "Okay maybe we don't trust our leaders, but we still believe they have dominion over us. We know we're obliged to work, to feed them with our wealth, to obey, to defend them with our lives if need be."

She reaches in her pants pocket and takes out a slip of paper, studies it.

"And if you ask why? They show you pictures of dead guys."

She unfolds it and flattens it against the glass. George Washington. One dollar, hanging there briefly in the condensation.

She turns to look at him sitting there.

"It's only by our symbols that we prove we are the chosen. You must never question the doctrine. Because the doctrine can only be proven from inside the doctrine."

Her eyes in the cool light are dimly beginning to resemble those of someone he wants to care about. Almost.

"So where am I gonna go? Show me. Show me a place where they haven't already run their fiber-optic cables, and I'll fucking walk there."

And now she is close enough that he can smell her anguish.

Miriam is standing a short distance behind Lily. She frowns at Julian. She's trying to cue him, the way they sometimes cue each other in the field. Julian turns to Lily again.

"Lily. You know something? You're right. You're right. Every religion contains some element of the irrational."

"Something we can't prove," says Miriam.

"I mean, religious believers are not crazy people. In general, they don't think they can fly. Most of them can hold down a job, drive a car, balance a checkbook. But."

"But," Miriam says, "within the realm of worship, they do allow themselves an excursion from common sense. They believe in things."

"Beings we can't see, happenings that would never happen."

"And guess what. That's okay."

"It's perfectly harmless."

"It's just part of the human condition."

Lily's eyes dart from one to the other. She smiles a Manson-clan smile.

"Are we on TV?"

Julian gets to his feet and comes closer to her.

"When it becomes *not* okay is when that condition detaches itself from the context of religious worship, and overpowers the rest of your life."

"And that," Miriam says, "is when you begin to lose your freedom of thought."

"You begin to believe that every commandment of your masters is a sacred thing."

"Thou shalt," Lily says.

Julian nods. "Thou shalt, thou shalt not."

"Thou shalt buy on credit and live in debt your whole life. Because it's good for the financial industry."

"Okay," Julian says.

"Thou shalt prolong life by every means possible, even at the expense of dignity, because it's good for the medical industry."

Julian says "All right."

"Thou shalt have children," Lily continues, "whether you want them or not. Cuz it's good for the videogame industry. Thou shalt worship technology, and honor it because it's cool. And thou shalt worship the state. Because it's there."

Julian glances at his partner. She's frowning too.

"Lily, what are you really talking about?"

Lily looks at him, confused. "Are you Bozo? Bozo the clown, are you him?"

"No."

"I didn't think so."

"Are we still talking about the 'society' thing?" Julian asks.

Lily looks spooked. Her eyes drop to the floor.

"Uh, no, I think we're done now. Thanks for the coffee."

She starts for the door.

"Wait, wait wait wait —"

Together with Miriam he tries to block her.

"Don't go now," Miriam says.

"Come on, don't go now."

"Lily," Miriam says. "Don't. Stay here and do the work."

"Do the work, Lily."

"Don't!"

It becomes a quite physical struggle halfway across the room. But then Julian breaks away, holding his hands in the air.

"All right. All right, go!"

Miriam lets go too. She's left with one phone cord in her hand.

"Tell me something, Lily," Julian raises his voice. "Where you gonna go? Huh? Answer me that. Where you gonna go? You gonna go back out there? Out there in the rain? Huh? Where you gonna go, Lily?"

The exit sign over the door pops on. The coffeemaker clicks. Then the aquarium aerator starts gurgling, and the fridge motor hums, and the overhead lights flicker back to life.

"Nowhere, I guess."

Lily has her purse and her blue raincoat over one arm. She picks up the little gun from the desk, and goes out the frosted glass door.

Julian approaches the door and stands there looking at it.

"Fruit. Cake."

He turns. Miriam is plugging in her phone handset.

"That was one very confused young woman. Who are you calling?"

"The police, what do you think? That girl's gonna hurt somebody."

He reaches for the door of the little fridge. "You want a beer?"

"Hell yeah."

She looks out over the city lights. She hasn't even buttoned her raincoat. She is drenched, beaten, but she doesn't feel cold. She looks up. The lightning is huge, high, dancing in blobs around the urban sky, without striking down. The thunder comes as gentle roaring instead of hard cracks. She feels a benevolent presence in the air.

She is high enough that it's scary to look over the edge, but not so high she can't hear the sussurus of cars in the stormy streets. On the next rooftop a billboard rises on a steel truss under a bank of floodlights. The face of a clear-skinned pretty woman shares space with blue jumpy words — I DID IT TOO! And the logo of a telecom company.

Lily smiles back at the model.

She opens her mouth and puts the gun barrel against her tongue, and tastes it for a moment.

Then she aims it at the billboard and lets off a shot. Bang. It's the first time she has ever actually fired a gun, and the recoil almost makes her lose her balance.

There's a small hole in one of the model's everwhite teeth. The sight of it makes Lily giggle. She feels okay now. Then she feels a gust of wind, and thinks about stepping back from the edge.

Miriam is still on the phone. The 911 operator has switched her to Boston Police, and a car is on the way, but someone still wants to talk to her. "Early twenties," she is repeating, "dark hair not too long except in front. Blue raincoat."

*Blue raincoat.* In the instant she says it, something blue and blurry falls past the window glass in the rain.

"Oh dear lord," Miriam says.

But when she and Julian burst out the downstairs door onto the sidewalk, they find only a blue raincoat floating in the gutter. The young white girl who wore it seems to have dissolved.

The police siren goes yip-yip like a small dog. Further away, there's the call of an ambulance coming soon.

And just when Lily thinks it's impossible for it to rain any harder, the pelting seems to double in strength. As if God is saying *oh yeah?*

She tries to remember the last time she felt real rain on her naked body. She lifts her arms and her face to the sky, and closes her eyes to the billion bullets of rain flowing over her naked skin. She lets it collect in her open mouth, then spits it back out like a gargoyle. She runs the palms of her hands over her breasts to feel how hard her nipples are. She leans back and lets the sky beat against her belly. She leans forward and it beats over her shoulders and back. She is just beginning to feel clean now. If it rains any harder she will drown, together with all life on earth.

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