

*MINA LOY*

by Prof. Ethan P. Quest

On the 20th of January, pacing brutally through the snow, I noticed a billboard on the side of the main street. It was planted there monolithically, buried in white as if it were a heritage site, but I would have sworn I'd never seen it before in my life. I was not long in the town (three months to the day), and yet my attention to detail had always been keen, or keenly felt (as a child I had driven my mother insane by pointing out emerging wrinkles, and sewing their odd patterns into lace on Sundays). The billboard was at least as big as a pool, perhaps filled with 100 strong adult men. The colour of it I can't describe, though I will say it had the barbarity of peach against the snow. In capitalised, large letters it simply said:

**MINA LOY**

Each day that I passed by, wearing out my shoes with the daily drenching and drying, I stared at the billboard a little bit longer. It was after 5 days I first stopped in my tracks to look at the thing, perhaps for a full ten minutes; I combed every inch of it with my eye, tracing an imaginary hand over the vast letters like a shy, blind incubus in a library. Not having been long in town, my ignorance did not leave me so upset; perhaps it was a local thing, like the mannequin fair or the wax-model building festival. My first thought was to ask Michelle at work, a fine and handsome adult woman, the first to welcome me to the office with her full-bodied smile, and the first to teach me how to use the computers. I ran a hand through my hair, fixed my glasses and approached her. Michelle laughed at me coyly, and said she hadn't seen such a billboard, but that if I wanted to know about 'MINA LOY' my best bet was to start within the company. We had, she told me, a resident Egyptologist on staff, who would answer any and all questions I might have.

That evening, after punching out, I resolved to visit the Egyptologist. Her office was fifty flights underground, and I had to ride an enormous freight elevator to reach it. I fidgeted, picked the dirt from under my fingernails. Out of the corner of my eye was a small sign underneath the buttons, plastered in dust. The gravity had fled my muscles, and for no discernible reason I bent down with some effort and began wiping the sign with my shirt-sleeve. Word by word it gave itself up: "Property of Mean Alloys Inc." The elevator paused, then quaked horribly, then paused, then halted, then came to a rest, then stopped. Clipping out into the room, the faint smell of Egypt was unmistakable. The ceiling was low and a few bare amber bulbs dripped off it, vivified by an alternating current slow enough to be sensible.

'I've been expecting you'

'Oh. I... Oh?'

'You want to know about MINA LOY'

'Yes!. Well.. I want to find out what I don't know, I suppose.'

She turned, all silver hair and a flat face and a nose that looked pretty pleased with itself, all things considered, at landing the position. She looked me up and down vigorously, fist-sized pyramid necklace-links dancing on an ancient chest.

‘Have a seat’

She sat still for a minute, turned sideways from her desk to stay staring at me as I looked around for somewhere to sit. I settled on a boy-sized sphinx model carved from rosewood, and perched my bottom on its back.

‘I always knew this day would come’

‘Did you? I appreciate you meeting me all the same. Michelle said you would be -’

‘Michelle’s no longer with us.’

At this the few bulbs took turns to light the room inadequately for a moment each, before humming back into unison.

‘I’m not sure what you mean. I had a word with her about an hour ago.. A handsome woman-’

‘How long were you in the elevator?’

I began to answer, but stopped almost instantly, feeling as if my brain was cannoning itself in ghostly portions out into the air behind my head. My hands started shaking. I wanted to look at them, but couldn’t bring myself to do it.

‘I’m going to show you a video, now.’

She placed a palm on her desk and its inner mechanisms shivered to life; a clunky little box slid out the side of it and began projecting a patchy image into the air between us.

It was a video of myself from the previous afternoon, stood on the side of the main street staring at a billboard. I shifted on the sphynx, feeling the magnetic draw of my hands, and each one of my fingers screaming at me for attention.

‘I don’t feel well’

‘Watch’

I watched. There I was, up to my ankles in snow. I felt five minutes go by, slowly. But when I expected to see my figure start walking away, the hoary projection began to keep continuing. I did not move. The snow, laboriously, melted around me as day turned to dusk to night, and then back to morning, over and over. Endless adults and children and cars passed through the frame, smuggling motion in with them. The days began to last longer, the sun exceeding the frame of the projection, and casting four shadows around my stock-still figure. My hands buzzed at my side pathetically. I watched myself pass through Autumn and back to Winter before another four rounds of seasons went by. When finally, momentarily, a foot inched forward, the projection disappeared itself, and we sat in silence for some time.

‘It’s been five years?’

Silence. She looked something like how a person should look if they were pretending to be embarrassed.

‘It’s actually been ten, now that we’ve watched the video’

My hands finally gave up to a vast numbness. I felt tears forming in my eyes, but I couldn't move to wipe them. The very thought of motion was dizzying, and I sat stiff as she began to saunter forward, pink and gold chiffon hugging her thighs with each stride. She stopped inches from my face, breathing sweetly. I was frozen, my hands disappearing and my eyes quietly soaking my cheeks. She rubbed me all over with a syrupy balm, and then began to wrap me up, starting with my feet, in coarse strips of linen. Each successive layer hugged my body a little tighter to itself, and as she reached my eyes, the world started to reduce by shades.



I live now inside a pyramid so big it makes the desert blush. I'm surrounded by gold and the guarantors of safe passage to another life. I can't move but every exhalation breathes MINA LOY into my death mask, whispering a warning down the tunnels of eternity.