

The Pyramid and the Ass

On the evening when most of the civilized world was watching the Oscars on Innervision, Douglas Duncage, Ninth Incarnation, was having trouble enjoying the glamour. He sat on a leather couch in his Manhattan penthouse, sucking a Keebler Frozie Mocha Treat, watching Natasha Smoker, Sixth Incarnation, receive her award. Her nouveau black and white kimono fluttered in Douglas's vision, soothing his retinal sensors with silk. Innereye's color loss was mitigated by its sensitivity to texture, a small tradeoff that was worth it in cases like this. Douglas felt the jolt of weight of the award as Natasha Smoker's fingers wrapped around the statue. Satellite impulses triggered the release of serotonin and his eyes welled with tears. Her performance in *Noah's Ark* had been phenomenal; everyone had cried when she rescued the baby gorilla from the rain.

When the commercials appeared, Douglas focused his internal mouse, blinked his right eye to click the mute button, and activated his parietal lobe to open his eyemail. Superimposed over the commercials came the bright white of his inbox folder. He'd received seventeen new eyemails since the last commercial break. Over half were work related; three were in response to his EyeDate profile; and four were from Americannewswatch.com. The news was grim. A group of radical Buddhist terrorists, known as The Sword of Transcendental Wisdom, had kidnapped an ecotour of Americans in Tibet. On a televised broadcast, the Dalai Lama denied responsibility for the kidnappings, once again condemning Soul Co.

“The use of laser technology has corrupted reincarnation for profit and disrupted the natural balance of life and death,” he declared.

“Fucking Buddhists,” Douglas thought as he mentally scrolled down the page. It was the fifth kidnapping this month and Douglas knew enough about Buddhist terrorists to predict the outcome. Satellites would be pulled from spinal cords, eyescreens would be sliced open, and the tourists would never be seen again.

Being kidnapped by Buddhist terrorists was Douglas’s worst fear, and he full-heartedly approved of George W. Bush, Tenth Incarnation’s, declaration of war on Tibet. Douglas had watched the bombings on FOX. Unfortunately, the Dalai Lama had escaped into the Himalayas and was now holed up in some cave, from where he sporadically broadcast televised screeds against America. If only they’d nuke the Dalai Lama. Hell, nuke Bush’s critics with him. He knew their liberal discourse all too well. Bush shouldn’t be permitted to be reelected for the nineteenth time just because he was in a new body; America was only in Tibet for the Himalayan quartz crystals; the US government had trained The Sword of T.W. in exchange for reincarnation info; yadda, yadda. The sooner Tibet became a US protectorate like Syria and Iceland, the sooner there’d be peace.

Douglas blinked off the news report and checked the response to his EyeDate profile. *Hi there, sexy. You sound high-tech. You want to meet later tonight? I get off work at ten. Shoot me a blink. K-5478.* It sounded promising. Douglas checked the clock at the bottom of his vision. There was still time to ogle some Innet ass before getting in contact with K-5478.

Since the Personal Privacy Act had been passed, the number of online ass sites had greatly diminished. There were, however, still a couple ass links available. Amongst these were Asian-male/female-ass.com, Black-male/female-ass.com, and the somewhat troubling Buddhist-male/female-ass.com. This last one was certainly tempting. Douglas longed to see what terrorist asses looked like. He imagined them puckered and wrinkled from meditating all day.

Whether Buddhist asses were puckered or wrinkled would remain a mystery, for as far as Douglas was concerned, that site was off limits. There were rumors that Buddhist-ass.com had been set up by the U.S. government to monitor national security threats. To log on would be to mark every file of his soul as a terrorist. No thank you. He had no interest in joining the detainees in Cuba. Douglas mentally typed in Whitefemaleass.com instead. Within seconds a mountain of pure ass filled his eyes. Two round buttery mounds, not a hair on them, with that glorious river of a crack running between the buttock valley.

As Douglas admired the perfection of the ass, The Awful Feeling reemerged. It was a pain he'd been suffering over the past year, and one that came with a very specific thought. *I don't feel like myself*. The thought was particularly disturbing because there was, technically, nothing wrong with him. He was thirty-five, had accumulated enough credits over his incarnations to live luxuriantly, he had recently upgraded his eyedrive, and just last week downloaded the latest version of InnercourseXL. What then could possibly make him feel *not* like himself? All the same, the feeling was there. And this feeling was sparked by the fact that the white ass in his vision evoked a tingling sensation around his groin, not altogether unpleasant but foreign. Back in his second incarnation he

might've worried about his appendix, but they'd removed that organ from his clone. In addition, ever since procreation had become obsolete, erogenous nerve impulses had been scrambled. Douglas's fear was, for this reason, unfounded.

Yet that ass—those salacious dromedarian marshmallow melons of goodness, like two round balls of pizza dough—there was the sensation again. A warm, maddening heat that made Douglas want to rub his belly against the carpeting, pull his pants up and down, grind his ass against a wall. He squirmed on the couch uncomfortably, sweating as though he'd been having Innercourse. Douglas decided to schedule a lab technician check-up when he got back from his business trip. Perhaps there was something wrong with his microchip, some satellitic misfiring of synapses. Worse yet—and he really didn't want to consider this—perhaps he'd contracted a virus.

Douglas checked the clock: 10:14. K-5478 would be off work by now. He blinked off Whitefemaleass.com, activated his VirusRub28, logged onto EyeDate, and sent K-5478 an instant blink. Within seconds she blinked Douglas back. “Hi there, D-6701, was wondering when you'd blink me.”

“Wanted to blink you sooner, but you were working.”

“If we get to know each other better I might be up for you blinking me at work.”

“Why don't you tell me a little about yourself.”

“I'm tall, skinny, have really nice hair, and a great ass.” The last four words scrolled across Douglas's vision seductively.

“Oh yeah? I like asses.”

“Me too. What about you? What system do you run?”

“Only the best: Eyedoc78, full brain-cell drive.”

“Hmm . . . you must make a lot of money.”

“I don’t do bad,” Douglas eyetyped, pausing for a moment before making his move. “Are we compatible?”

“Mmm-hmm. Why? Can’t you feel this?”

Douglas’s synapses fired as K-5478 tested his system with a packet of information. There was an immediate release of dopamine as Douglas’s satellite chip warmed up. “Oooh, yeah, I can feel that. Go ahead and do that again.”

“You like that? How about this?”

“Fuck yeah,” he eyed. “My bandwidth is so big.” Douglas used his occipital lobe to blink off a long download from his hard drive.

“Mmm, I love it when you send me slow downloads. Oooh God, it’s taking so fucking long to download!” As the words scrolled across Douglas’s vision, a large file imported into his brain. He leaned back into the couch, head sinking into the leather, as he transferred another large file.

“Oh, God, yes! Go ahead, my system can take it.”

He gave her a couple terabytes.

“Mmm...fuck yes. Keep going. Don’t stop.”

Douglas hadn’t meant to stop, but he’d mis-blinked and turned Innervision back on. On the screen Brandon Pitts was pitching SoulCo. *Suspend your soul in your own personal quartz crystal till your NewSelf is ready for reincarnation! Heaven can wait, till then there’s SoulC*—Douglas blinked off the commercial. “Can you take a torrent file?” he eyed.

“Ohhhh, baby, I’m a torrent player,” the words moaned. Douglas sent off the file.

“Mmmm, two can play at that game.”

Douglas felt his brain struggling to download the full capacity of the torrent file K-5478 sent him. “You’re getting my system so hot!” he eyed, trying hard not to overheat. His hands clawed into the couch as he struggled to thinktype. “Yeslh!” he mistyped. And now she was sending him file after file. As one file disappeared another rode in behind with rhythmic succession. Downloads tumbled atop one another, opening, downloading, opening further to another page. He kept his internal finger on the mouse pad, scrolling and clicking.

“Oh m;y Goddd, these files just keep opening and opekning. You’re ducking beutful,” she mistyped.

“You’re so fixking hort!” he trembled to think, and then his satellite was buzzing with the electronic hum that comes those magnificent electric seconds before all Innet vision goes blank. “Gjdk! Gpd! GFOD!” he chanted, and she joined him, “Gjdi, Gid, GODu!” As he hung on, sending off another file, pause, file, pause, his screen was vibrating, the hourglass turning back and forth, and as he received one last file, he sent off a final download with numerous attachments.

“Godalkdjj;ID;oiuaelmmm...” came the response.

“ASOLAKERJL;ENDL.CHKLE;N!!!” Douglas managed, his eyescreens flickering as he slid back against the couch. Slowly, his system rebooted itself, the satellite whirring beneath his skin. A few words landed on his eyescreens.

“Thanks D-6701. Blink me again sometime.”

“Sure will K-5478,” he eyed, and logged off.

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Innecourse had been good that evening, and that, along with the emotional effects of the Oscars, left Douglas feeling altogether exhausted as he curled into bed and pulled the comforters around him. Douglas felt so tired he decided not to download his usual dose of Seconol, and it was due to this lack of medication that he had another of the unusual dreams that'd been plaguing him for the past year.

He dreamt of the woman again. They were standing on top of a large Buddhist temple. He was placing the last stone into the top of the monument when he saw her. The stone slipped and fell by his feet. "They're coming," she said. She extended her arm and he followed her gaze. Far below, the city blinked neon into the night. Large signs extended from the jungle of streets and houses, the glowing arches of an M lighting the urban landscape. Then he saw the dark bodies of the tanks and the sound of choppers cut the air like the fluttering of great metal dragonflies. "We didn't make it this incarnation!" the woman said. From below a voice yelled, "Fire!" A mortar shell exploded, bricks shattered, and white rubble rained around them. The woman took his palms and folded them over his abdomen. "This is how you remember your memories. You've got to remember who you are. Remember why you left us."

"Who are you?" he asked. He tried to search the Innet for her name, but his eyescreens were blank. One of the helicopters dropped its explosives. The walls split open, and the temple crumbled beneath him. As Douglas fell, the outline of the woman, standing far above him, receded into the darkness.

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Douglas awoke, deeply shaken, to a lovely May morning. This was the last time he went to bed without Seconol, he promised himself. He took a shower, got dressed, and

fixed himself a bowl of Keebler Puffy Treats. He sat at his kitchen table, eating the cereal and scrolled through his eyemails. There was an eyemail from Phillip Monto, Ninth Incarnation, the meet-and-greet courier that Douglas was flying in to connect with. The eyemail invited him out for dinner and drinks that evening, courtesy of SoulCo's Denver Division. There would be a Hummer waiting for him at Apex when he arrived. Douglas checked his personal eyemails. There were a couple responses to his EyeDate profile and then another series of upsetting messages from Americannewswatch.com. The Dalai Lama had issued a new speech.

“America tries to control life because they have no knowledge of their own true souls. Not until America accepts the Bordo realms of reincarnation will they know peace. SoulCo's mission has disturbed the karmic laws of rebirth and—” Enough of that guy's shit. Douglas blinked off the broadcast, put his bowl in the sink, and headed out of his apartment.

Outside there wasn't a cloud in the sky, and the heavens were a magnificent white. Douglas felt happy. Of Innernet's three color choices, Douglas liked white more than black or gray. It was a beautiful spring day and the trees were sending out white buds. The white branches swayed slightly in the breeze. Douglas had turned on his eyetunes early that morning, and as he walked towards his Hummer he was pleased to hear that he'd lined up his playlist perfectly. Everything was in harmony with the music pulsing through his brain. The Hummers cued up mechanically at intersections, allowing other Hummers to motor past. Then those Hummers stopped and other Hummers rolled through in perfect playlist synchronicity. Across the street, a city worker scrubbed the

wall, removing the graffiti outline of a pyramid, in time to the music. Even the couple pigeons that fussed about the concrete seemed tuned in.

Douglas got to his Hummer and passed his wrist over the handle. The door unlocked and Douglas climbed into the driver's seat. He right-blinked the Hummer icon in the lower left of his vision, scrolled down his destination lists, and left-blinked *Office*. The Hummer started up and backed out of the spot, electronically signaling the other Hummers to allow his exit.

Outside, New York City was in full white spring glory. White tablecloths fluttered at outdoor cafés, and people strolled through Central Park. New York City was beautiful, Douglas thought, and as his Hummer pulled into the garage of SoulCo's Upper Manhattan Office, Douglas had begun to feel like himself again.

A number of other workers arrived at the same time as Douglas. They piled into SoulCo's elevator and stood listening to their eyetunes as the elevator rocketed towards the apex of the tower. Douglas's ears began ringing. He turned down his music. "Hello?" he said aloud.

"Hey there, Doug, just making sure you're on your way in."

"In the elevator right now. The crystals set to go?"

"On my desk and waiting."

"Great. See you in less than a minute."

"Righto," the boss said, and the connection went dead.

The briefcase was made of white titanium and was filled with the crystals of fifty-seven souls. It felt heavy in Douglas's hand. His boss, a stout man in a black suit, sat

behind a white desk. Behind him, through the ceiling to floor windows, the towers of Manhattan rose in white peaks.

“You all right today,” the boss asked. “You look like shit.”

“Skipped my Seconol dose and slept awful.”

The boss grunted. “Look, you’ve got fifty-seven souls there. I recommended you for this transport because you’re the best courier we’ve got for a job this size. In other words, I can’t have you falling asleep on the plane.”

“Don’t worry, I’m awake.”

“You don’t look very awake to me. You got any Alertin?”

“I can order some.”

“Here, take these,” the boss said and blinked. Douglas saw two attachments for Alertin arrive in his inbox. “Use one now; the other one’s if you feel like you need it later. We can’t have you dozing off with a shipment like that.”

Douglas downloaded one of the Alertins. It was like a strong cup of coffee to his synapses. “Thanks,” he said.

“Hey, only the best for the best,” the boss said and winked. Checking his fucking eyemail while he talks to me, Douglas thought. “Have a good trip,” the boss said. “And don’t look at too many asses while you’re out there.” The boss winked again.

“I’ll do what I can,” Douglas joked back, but the boss was already winking away, not hearing a word he said.

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Why is it that no matter how advanced technology gets, air travel eternally remains in the Stone Age? Douglas pondered this question as he stood on yet another

line taking off his shoes and unbuttoning his shirt. Ahead of him a woman in a white brassiere stood in a small cubicle getting puffed by jets of electronic data. Douglas put his clothes on the conveyer belt and walked bare-chested into the booth.

His direct flight had been cancelled, and he'd been bumped to a partner airline that had a flight to Denver with connections through Philly, Minneapolis, and Chicago. Unfortunately the first leg to Philly was delayed, forcing him to miss his flight in Minneapolis, and catch a commuter to Chicago. The sun was setting when Douglas finally boarded Chicago Flight 457 to Denver. Though the company had booked business class, his standby status bumped him back to economy. He emailed Phillip Monto to say he was delayed. No problem, the eyemail came back, Grab a bite on the plane and we'll make it after-dinner cocktails instead.

Innernet activity was prohibited on all flights, and without it Douglas felt bored. He looked out through his window. Along the tarmac, men in white jumpsuits waved white neon sticks at incoming planes. Douglas placed his foot on the briefcase beneath his seat and yawned. No good falling asleep now. He leaned forward and took the airline magazine from the seat pocket. *Viva Las Vegas!* was written across the front, underneath which a showgirl in white peacock feathers danced. Douglas skimmed the articles. There were the exotic white fish of Palestine, the wild nightlife of Baghdad, the lively markets of Lebanon. To have a job transporting souls to those countries, now there was the courier job to have. Better yet was securing an upper management job engineering the transmission of souls into crystals. That meant knowing how to scan souls for undesirable elements, inject preferred attributes, and remove unwanted memories. You needed an incarnation of government training to secure a job like that.

All the same, perhaps that was the way to go. Douglas's fingers paused mid-turn. A photo on the *Viva Las Vegas!* page made his abdomen grow cold.

Between the white lights of Las Vegas' unfinished Tower of Babel Casino and the Trump Galleon Hotel, stood the world famous Luxor. The black pyramid rose like a phantom memory. A thought flashed across Douglas's mind like an instant blink. *You've forgotten what you came to do.* Douglas had a deep belly feeling of despair, and the accompanying awful sensation of an unreachable memory. For God's sake, flip the page. But he couldn't, and as he looked at the pyramid rising from the neon-lit metropolis, a thick coil of heat unraveled in his belly. He put his hands against his abdomen to calm the feeling. As his palms touched his stomach, a memory flashed clear as a high-definition image. He was standing on the ridge of a temple. Far below, a skinny white man stood yelling through a bullhorn. *We've Got You Surrounded!* The woman grabbed his hand. "Remember me," she said.

Douglas pulled his hands away as though they'd been scalded. For the love of God, what was going on? The plane was rolling down the runway, picking up speed. The tip of the plane tilted up, triangulating a perfect diagonal against the runway as precise as the ridge of a pyramid. His finger was still holding the page open, the Luxor staring back at him. Douglas slapped the magazine closed. Hands shaking, he placed it back in the seat pocket.

Something was very wrong with him. He needed to log back on and take a couple Percodextrins and a Metabutronol, but that wouldn't be possible till they landed. A drink then, he thought. Indeed. A drink, and some food, and then, if they were showing a movie, he'd pay the money and keep himself entertained for the rest of the flight.

Outside, the sun blazed brilliant white, its belly submerged in the clouds like a mighty God, and though Douglas knew he shouldn't, he stared at it as though in deep meditation.

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The Hummer was waiting for Douglas at the rental place. The Apex attendant downloaded the keys into Douglas's system and Douglas set the coordinates for Colfax. As the Hummer navigated Denver's gray ribbon of highway, Douglas relaxed in his seat. The Percodextrin and Metabutronol had helped him feel calmer, and after taking the Alertin, Douglas felt like himself again. The billboards along the freeway blinked white against the night sky. *Keebler Frozie Mocha Treats—Simply FantASStic!* a sign broadcast, beneath which a woman's ass pushed suggestively towards the passing car.

As the Hummer parallel parked along Colfax, Douglas sent an instant blink to Phillip. He made sure the briefcase was hidden beneath the seat then got out of his car and activated the security alarm. Half a block down, the neon lights of two buttocks flashed into the night. Beneath the sign was a skinny white man in a white suit. The man raised his hand into the air. "Hey there!" Phillip Monto's words echoed across the concrete. Douglas's belly went cold. The man was waving a bullhorn. *Hey! You up there! We've got you surrounded!* The pale neon lights of the buttocks made Monto's features appear distorted and grotesque, his grinning teeth gleaming with the shine of the river Styx. "You made it, chief!" Monto said, lowering his hand, which held a smoldering cigarette. He pulled his other hand from his pocket and shook Douglas's. "Flight go all right?"

Douglas released Monto's grip and wiped his brow. "Besides being five hours delayed, bad food, and being an overall pain in the ass, not bad."

Monto blinked a couple times. “Oh yeah, yeah. Well, what can you expect? Air travel: complete hell. Well, listen, I hope I’m not being presumptuous here, but I heard you were an ass man.”

“Who isn’t?” Douglas said.

“Dalai Lama, that’s fucking who! Bunch of bullshit’s what I say; I bet he’s in his cave right now wishing he had some ass!” He gave Douglas another skeletal grin.

“Probably got all the Buddhist ass he needs.”

“Even so, the guy’s missing out.” Monto gestured with his chin towards the doors of Rocky Mounds. “Best Live-Ass club in Denver. They got all types in there. White, Black, Asian. Come on, let’s get you a drink.” And though Douglas had the urge to retreat to the vault of his Hummer, he followed Monto through the doors.

The dim lights of the club cast shadows on the men sitting at the tables. Waitresses flittered through the room like ghosts, their short white skirts pulled up high to reveal a glimpse of their buttocks. Monto took a table near the stage. “What can I get you?” he asked.

“Mojito, if they’ve got it. Otherwise I’ll take—”

“Hey, you’re in the best club in Denver, they’ve got it.”

“Here, let me send you some credits.” He pulled up his accounts page.

“Don’t even try,” Monto winked. “I’m blocking any credit downloads from you tonight. SoulCo’s treating. Couriers have to enjoy some benefits.”

Douglas sat back in his chair. Lit by stage lights, three women, one black, one white, one Asian, bounced their asses in time with a DJ playing drum and bass. Over the music, the words *Ass, Ass, Ass* pounded. The asses were thick, rich, and voluptuous, like

silky mountains of—there it was again, an infuriating unreachable tingle between his legs. Douglas’s belly began to spasm. He instinctively placed his hands on his stomach to calm himself. As his palms touched his abdomen a vision flashed in his mind. He was in bed with the woman; she was kissing his face, his neck, his lips; a candle flickered against the wall; the shadow of a moth fluttered against the flame, circling and circling before catching fire.

“What did I tell you, not bad huh?” Monto said as the waitress brought their drinks.

“What?” Douglas said. His body was covered in a thin film of sweat. He removed his hands from his belly. “Oh yeah. That white ass is top notch.”

“I’m an Asian guy myself. Man just look at those pillows. Yeah, baby! Make that ass clap!” He lifted his glass towards Douglas. “Hey, here’s to SoulCo!”

“To SoulCo,” Douglas responded and the men clinked.

“So, you’ve got some pretty heavy luggage with you.”

“Fifty-seven souls.”

“Hot damn. You *must* be good. Boss said to me, you take this guy out, show him a good time, he works for the big guy. So I had it all set up for us tonight, wine and dine on the budget. On the budget! Shame your flight was delayed, they’ve got a great steakhouse out here. Porterhouse rounds big as that black ass up there. Soft as it too! Hey, SoulCo knows how to make it happen. Right? Right! But tell me something: you ever seen any Buddhist ass?”

“Wouldn’t want to.”

“Nah, me neither, but you gotta wonder what those asses look like.”

Douglas took a sip of his drink. He turned his eyes to the stage. The girls had their hands on their knees and were thrusting their asses towards him. Douglas broke into a sweat, his stomach convulsing. He needed to get some cold water on his face.

“Where’s the bathroom?” he asked.

“Right side of the bar.” Monto nodded his bony chin towards the back of the club.

Douglas’s legs felt hollow as he rose. He navigated through the murky light, waitresses fluttering past like spirits, the music throbbing in his temples. He slammed against the bathroom door, and entered the white-tiled glow of the men’s room.

Alone. Thank God. He cupped his hands beneath the cold water and splashed his face. Cool rivulets rolled down his neck, soaking his collar. He looked at himself in the mirror. His black hair was unkempt, his eyes wild. For God’s sake, Doug, pull yourself together. Take a piss, settle down, everything’s going to be fine. He chose a urinal, unzipped his pants, and pulled out his penis. It hung limp, as a thin stream streamed from its tip. His belly was beginning to feel better, and he let out a breath of relief and looked up. There, amongst the scribbled graffiti, was a crude drawing of a pyramid with an eye at its center. Douglas’s belly went cold. He put his hand against the wall to keep himself from falling over. *In God We Trust*. The memory jangled though his mind like change in a pocket. *That’ll be three twenty five, due back next Saturday*.

They’d rented a movie. She’d suggested a comedy, and he’d put the pyramids down one after another on the counter beneath the fluorescents. The light of the awning as they exited the store had lit her face so beautifully, and the color of the awning had been . . .not white . . .but . . . Blockbuster. That was her name! She was Blockbuster! It’d been cold. There was snow falling. There was a couch. He’d paid with pyramids,

and they'd never finished the movie. She'd snuggled against him and said, "I'm sleepy." And the moth had flown into the candle as she held the pyramid to the light.

But, no, that was all wrong. It wasn't after a video. The video rental had happened in a previous incarnation. She was holding a dollar bill up the light of the candle so he could look at it, their daughter asleep in the adjacent room, and she'd said, "This is to help you remember."

"What is it?"

"A dollar bill. We used to use this when were together the last lifetime. You don't remember?"

"No. I'm not at that stage of memory yet."

"Remember this pyramid," she said. "The resistance will paint it everywhere we can to help you. If they destroy us before we finish the temple, it's up to you to find us again."

"I'll remember," he'd promised. "It might take incarnations, but I'll work my way in. We'll destroy SoulCo from the top down." But his voice had been shaking, as though he could hear the tanks that would soon be rolling towards them. Then the moth flew into the candle, shocking them both, and it rose like some ancient Sun God, flames shooting from its wings as it kicked its legs into empty air. She rolled atop him and kissed him. No, she took him by the hand and they ran down the temple steps, sand beneath his feet. "We haven't made it this time!" Pushing further, his hands around her naked body, her hands on his stomach, his hands around another stone, scooping up mortar, sun blazing hot, sweating, lie the sandstone, slide the mortar, push it down, holding onto her as she placed both hands against his chest and rocked against him, push,

slide, rise, push, slide, rise, right hand holding troth, scooping mortar, brick down, push, slide, rise, push, slide, rise, candle bursting into brilliant light against her belly, flame shooting down through the crown of her head, down through her heart, down though her abdomen, and into him in a flash of white light. Pop.

And now, penis drained, Douglas realized in horror that his limp ligament, lifeless for seven incarnations, was beginning to rise. It snaked forth like a serpent charmed by the pulsing vibrations in his pelvis. It stretched its neck towards the toilet mint of the urinal, ready to devour it. *Ass, Ass, Ass.* The music pounded as the door to the men's room slammed open.

"God! I just love those asses!" a man in black jeans and a white t-shirt said as he sidled up next to Douglas. Douglas looked down at his penis. It was still stretching towards the porcelain. Sweat dripping down his neck, he stuffed his penis into his pants and zipped his fly. "Ain't those the best asses the Rockies got to give?" the man yelled.

"I don't know," Douglas said, stumbling towards the door.

He careened into the club. The women were on the stage, putting their hands on their knees, pushing their asses towards him. Phillip Monto, in his thin white suit, turned to face him. As he did, the gray lights hit his face, and Monto's skull opened into a wide grin. *This is Lieutenant Monto, we've got you surrounded!*

"Thought you got lost!" Monto said.

Douglas looked down at himself. His pants were still bulging abnormally. He put his hand in his pocket and held his penis against his leg. "I think I'm gonna have to call it a night," he said. "I'm bushed."

“You kidding me, it’s only eleven! Hell, bars don’t close till three. Come on, Doug. On the budget! You want to go somewhere else? There’s a place with straight Latina ass. That your style? You a Latina ass kind of guy?”

“No, it’s not that. Just had a hell of a day.” Douglas braced himself against the table.

“I can’t lie, you look bad. You need some Wellamutrin? I’ll send you as many as you need.”

“No, really I’m fine. I just need to get some sleep.”

“Well, hell, man, I’m sorry to see you go. Night was just getting started!” Monto’s tone was meant as jovial, but Douglas saw the look of distrust behind his eyes. Monto was blinking, sending off an eyemail. *Something wrong with this carrier, you want me to get the briefcase?* Douglas could see the bones through the skin as Monto extended his hand. He grasped it and shook, the bones rattling beneath his grip.

Douglas clambered away from the table. Across the bar, the doors of the club rose like two obsidian gates. He pushed past the bouncers and stumbled out into the neon lights of the buttocks, taking deep gulps of air. Breathe, Douglas, breathe. There’s something wrong with you. Make a technician appointment the moment you got back to Manhattan. Breathe. He made his way back to the rented car, swiped his wrist across the door handle, got in, and shut the door. Thank God he was back in his Hummer. He took a couple deep breaths. He looked down at his pants. They looked as flat as they always had. Douglas wiped the sweat from his forehead. He needed to calm down. A little Innercourse on the ride to the hotel would relax him. It was already one in New York, but it might not be too late to blink K-5478. Yes, some Innercourse, a couple Secanol, a

good night's rest, and he'd be okay. But then, at the top right of his screen, a white rag caught his attention. Douglas had time to utter a short yelp before the cloth covered mouth and his eyelids closed with the sigh of a computer shutting down.

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Along the Red Mountain Pass of Colorado stands an abandoned gas station. Its pumps are red with rust, the old computer pads for ATM cards smashed. The Mini Mart, once stocked with Keebler snacks, cola, and other munchies for the Mesa Verde bound traveler, is empty. The windows of the station are broken. Dust has sifted in through the jagged glass for centuries. It has piled like snow on the counter where gas attendants once stood, and buried the toppled Doritos' racks, whose metal ribs rise from the dirt like the bones of dinosaurs. Sediment has drifted into tall spires along the corners of the room. In this desolate location, amongst the forgotten blisters of National Parks, too costly to develop, too pointless to destroy, a green scarab beetle of a car comes to rest. Four yellow hoods step from the Toyota hatchback. They pull a man from the backseat.

Around the side of the building are two doors with white lettering. *Men. Women.* The tallest of the hooded individuals produces a key on a stick. The key is placed in the lock and the Women's door is opened. Inside, a circular stone staircase leads down. They carry the body down this staircase into the belly of a cavern, where the air is damp and the walls are jugged with pine roots. The yellow hoods drag the man through an archway and enter the main chamber. One of the hoods walks along the perimeter of the room. From his hand springs the egg-shaped flame of a lighter. He brings the flame down and lights wick after wick.

A steel hospital gurney rests in the center, reflecting the flickering candles as though lined with a dozen fiery eyes. The man is lain face down on the gurney. Upon a cold tray lie a scalpel, needles and thread, scissors, and a basin of water. The scissors are lifted and placed by the man's throat. Their sharpened edges slice through the man's collar, shearing his shirt from his torso. Then his pants and boxers are sliced open. He is flipped onto his stomach.

"Are we ready?" a female hood asks. The assembled group nods. She picks up the scalpel and places the cold blade against the skin of the man's spine. The assembled group begins to chant. *O mani padme hum, o mani padme hum*. As the blade splits the flesh, the man's eyes open, Innervision screens suddenly alive. Send off an eyemail! Send off an eyemail! Broadcast your location!

A white rag is placed over the man's nose and mouth, his pupils turning a dull gray as Innervision goes blank. The tall one leans down, the yellow hood close to the man's ear. "Don't be afraid," she whispers. "We're liberating you."

*

The first thing Douglas noticed when he opened his eyes, was that the sky had broken. Thick liquid oozed from clouds and covered the horizon. There were no words for the substance that plastered the sky like an open wound. The sight hurt Douglas's naked eyeballs, his retinas screaming.

"You're finally awake," a woman said. She came over and sat on the cot. "How do you feel?" She picked up a washcloth from a basin of water and dabbed his eyes with cool water. He turned his head to look at her, and saw yet another frightening sight. The thick liquid that oozed from the clouds had seeped into her features, tinting her face not

white, nor black, nor gray. He opened his mouth to speak but all that came out was a wail.

“Shhh,” the woman said, putting her hands on his abdomen. “You don’t have to be afraid. You’re seeing colors for the first time. It’s a beautiful experience.”

The sound of the woman’s voice and her hands on his belly brought clarity, and with it panic. Fragments of memories circled around his mind like burning moths. The neon buttocks of Rocky Mounds, his head banging against the glass of a car window, trying to log onto Innernet before the yellow hoods realized he was awake, watching the scalpel lowered towards his eyeball.

Behind the woman, a gruesome edifice split the sky. They were in a massive open cavern. Clay buildings with hollow windows rose from the ground like a city of sandcastles. The rock faces all bled variations of the liquid. Then, with horror, Douglas saw the framed photo of the Dalai Lama hanging on the wall. In that moment, as Douglas lay on a cot in Mesa Verde, his greatest fear in life was confirmed: he was being held hostage by Buddhist terrorists. He blinked in rapid succession, trying to pull up Innervision to send off a distress signal. His eyelids closed and opened. There was no small clock at the bottom of his vision, no EyeDate iconography along his left periphery.

“It’s gone,” the woman said. Douglas looked at her and tried to blink again. Nothing. Just her face, the color of the cliff walls, and her eyes, the color of the sky, as though her retinas were holes through which he could see the world. Her eyelids, however, were trembling. “Do you remember who I am?” she asked.

Perhaps if he answered right, told her what she wanted to hear, they wouldn’t execute him. Douglas had remembered her name once, back at Rocky Mounds. The

bathroom, the graffiti on the wall, she had wanted to rent a comedy, it was snowing. “Blockbuster!” he exclaimed. “I remember you. Your name’s Blockbuster! Listen, Blockbuster, I just want to go home. Please. I can give you whatever you want.”

She brought her hand to her face and wiped her tears. She smiled. “It’s okay,” she said. “I should’ve expected you wouldn’t recognize me; I don’t look the same anymore. Natural reincarnation does that to you. You’ll remember though, it’ll just take some time.” She got up from the cot. “I’ll make you a cup of tea.”

Against the far wall stood a clay hearth with a fire smoldering. Atop this fireplace lay a piece of sheet metal. The woman took a teakettle from the floor and placed it onto the makeshift stove. “This is where we live now,” she said. “It’s the only place they haven’t found us. I’ve saved your journals to help you remember,” she nodded towards the side of the cot. Beside Douglas lay a stack of books, their pages yellow, their covers dirty with the dust of centuries. “We’ve been rebuilding the temple,” she added. “It’s nearly finished.”

The teakettle was whistling. The woman raised the steaming pot from the stove and lowered it towards the two clay mugs. She poured the boiling water, placed the teapot onto the ground, and carried the cups towards Douglas.

“It’s chamomile,” she said, setting the steaming mugs by the side of the cot. “It used to be your favorite.” The steam wafted up, the smell familiar, earthy and sweet. “Louis, I know you’re frightened.” The name wiggled through Douglas’s mind like a lost memory. “It’s okay, you’re safe now. You tried the best you could. We’ve already smashed the fifty-seven crystals you brought. They’re liberated.” She placed her hands against his belly, the feeling of her palms familiar against his skin.

“Please, Blockbuster,” Douglas begged, “What do you want from me?”

“Nothing,” she said and leaned towards him. Lowering her face against his, she pressed her lips upon his eyelids. In the darkness of his logged off mind, she whispered, “I’m just glad you’re home.”