

Time of Day

By Nick Mamatas

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I had just gotten off work and was on my way to more work when the phones in my mind rang. It was another seven jobs calling in, begging for my attention. In headspace, my ego agent, a slick and well-tanned Victor Mature, arranged them according to potential economic gain, neo-Marxist need measurement, and location.

I stuck my coffee cup in the beverage holder and leaned heavily on the wheel. Traffic was snarled. I initiated my patented anti-traffic protocol: "Who, let's go!" I shouted. I even banged my hands on the dashboard, but the snaking lines of red lights between me and my gig weren't impressed. I rewarded myself with more coffee anyway.

In headspace, my homunculus -- a small, gray-winged gargoyle -- shook its fist at the car ahead of me. My ego agent handed me his travelling salesman recommendation, a crazed zigzag all over the tri-state. His plan was the cheapest and quickest way to install all the jacks, but my wetnurse was pinging about my pulse rate, lung color, and electrolyte levels, so I did my own math. I took two seconds to read a short article about another week of the Brown Haze over the city and decided that I needed a vacation. I'd do only one jackgig. A whole day spent on only one job instead of my usual eleven jobs a day. Far away. A monastery upstate, Greek Orthodox even. A vacation, or as close to one as jacked employees get.

The country would be quiet and the sky large. Like the parking lot I pulled into, but even bigger and with less soot.

"Okay, here we all are," I said to the kids. Not all my gigs were high-paying and glamorous; I was leading a tour of corporate HQ that night. Hi, I am Kelly Angelakis and I picked the short straw. Pleased to meet ya.

The kids gathered by the large office windows and stared up at me. They were college sophomores -- the oldest was probably thirteen -- and their eyes were wide and white, their skin slick with sweat. Their adrenal patches, all but mandatory for people on the go these days, were doing a bit too much to their young bodies. Some of the girls were almost vibrating in their sneakers. My ego agent provided me with some magnetizdat oral histories of patch addiction, but they were interrupted and replaced by soothing propaganda designed to reassure me. And I got some crosstought from another jack.

("Jesus forgive me, a miserable sinner!")

I sent the homunculus winging into the dark corners of my headspace to find the source of the crosstought, but he flew back to me empty-handed. Whoever was murmuring that little ditty needed a vacation worse than I did. Was it Sam, up on level seven? He was a pervert or something, and frequently filled nearby jacks with crapthink.

I couldn't bear to make eye contact with the tour group for more than a few seconds at a time, so I kept glancing out the window at the bright cityscape. The sky was black and the moon obscured by fog; more Brown Haze for tomorrow. A snarl of blinking red and white lights from the day's fifth rush hour entranced me for a second, but the sound of ten people twitching woke me up. I couldn't get a tenthsecond's rest that night.

My homunculus went and found that errant bit of religious crosstink: it came from the jackgig request up at the monastery. A distraction. Victor Mature stepped up to the mic to take over the tour.

(Stock footage of Bill Cosby entered from skull-right and accepted a cigar from Freud with a smile. "Some acumen agents may appear as imaginary friends." A human-sized cartoon cigar with flickering red ash for hair, goggle eyes rolling and stick-figure limbs akimbo, marched into view and waved. The crowd giggled as if on cue.)

In headspace, the homunculus flew into view and unfurled a parchment. A green visor hung from its horns and it waved a quill pen in one claw. Cute. My helicopter to the country was ready. I blinked my signature at the parchment and the image derezzed.

The children were all quivering eyes and hair slicked down against clammy skin (-- delete that, only happythink tonight!). Victor gave the standard disclaimer, pointed out the gift shop and cheerily spat out the company slogan, "We're Not Just Jack."

(Corporate logo, cue jingle.)

The helicopter was still ready, and I was already late. There was no way the elevator would get me to the roof on time. In headspace, My Pet Dog scuttled forward and stared at the copter's scheduling systems with his puppy-dog eyes. He scored twenty seconds for me. I took the steps up to the roof three at a time, swallowed a lungful of whipping smog on the helipad and hopped aboard.

(My Pet Dog was a droopy old basset hound with folds of brown and white fur draped over his snout. Designed to curry favor with acumen and humans alike,

he almost never failed. Even a helicopter had to submit to his cuteness.)

"Are you well rested, or just patched?" the pilot asked. He was old and had that skinny-guy-with-a-paunch look that ex-athletes and the unpatched had. I didn't know his name or number, so I couldn't look him up on the jacket. Small talk. Grr.

"I'm patched," I said, trying to sound a bit apologetic. "That's business, you know, a working girl has to make a living." He smiled when I said "working girl." What a Neanderthal. My Pet Dog had already sniffed out his body language and idiolect, cross-referenced it with his career choice, and suggested a conversational thread.

I looked out the window. "Shame, isn't it?" I knew he'd know I was talking about the smog.

"The Brown Haze. Have you ever seen a white cloud? I know you live in the city."

"Sure I've seen them, in the country. Won't there be some over the hills by the monastery?"

He nodded once, as people of his temperament tend to. "Yeah."

Then I realized that I was only hearing him with my ears. He wasn't jacked at all. He'd just waited for me instead of overriding his helicopter and taking off without me. He'd done -- what was it? -- a favor.

It was hot in the cockpit, too hot, and my connection to the net faded. Victor Mature was beginning to warble, but the wetnurse rushed up and gave me a shot of sleepytime before my jack overheated entirely. Snoozeville.

"Excuse me, I only had three seconds of the language," I said in heavily accented Greek. The monk just smiled, showing that he actually had a pair of lips under his thick black beard. It was quiet outside, and cold.

"Welcome to Saint Basil's," he said in the bland English of disk jockeys and foreigners who've had their accents eradicated. "I'm Brother Peter." He smiled weakly, his lips still moving slightly, like he was talking to himself. Or like he had just had a jack installed. ("It is two thirty five ay em," the homunculus whispered.) The monastery was impressive from the outside, at least: a squat four-story building made of thick carved granite. The lawn was well-kept, but still a bit wild, with weeds and poorly pruned bushes lining the walkway up the hill. I heard some crickets chirping away in soothing unison. It reminded me of the

city, but quieter, like the volume was turned down on the universe. The noise of the jacknet was far away too, like waves lapping a shoreline just out of sight.

"My God, you're tired." I looked him over but couldn't see any of the telltale sweat or twitches. My own patches responded to that stray thought with another surge of tingly chemicals to the bloodstream. I blinked hard and rose to the tips of my toes. "I'm sorry, I'm . . . you know . . . I am not used to people who . . . actually let themselves get tired."

"People who are not from the city," Peter said. He didn't smile this time, but he muttered something to himself after he spoke, then bowed his head slightly and took a step backward. "Come in, please."

I slipped through the door and frowned. The walls were plain old drywall, with an icon or two hanging from nails for decoration. The ceiling lights were old yellow incandescent bulbs, and the monastery's little foyer smelled of wax, incense, and unwashed feet. I got another burst of crossthought. (" . . . have mercy on me, a miserable sinner.")

The source was here, somewhere down below. I could feel a jack pinging nearby, a strange chanting beat. There was only one of them, though, not the thousands I was used to in the city. Like one water droplet falling into a still puddle, it stood out.

Even out in the real world, it was quiet. Wind moved over the grass. Peter tugged on the sleeve of my blouse.

"Ms. Angelakis, you'll need to retire for several hours at least. Morning prayers are in ninety minutes. Then we hold a morning liturgy, and of course--"

"Women may not attend the liturgy. After the morning meal, we will meet again so we may begin my examination of George Proios, who needs a jack installed," I said along with him. There were only two variances. Peter said "your examination" instead of "my examination," which I expected. More importantly, he said "removed" instead of "installed." And his lips moved even after he finished speaking.

"What? Why would he want his jack removed?" I asked, my voice spiking enough to make My Pet Dog wince. My ego agent immediately got FedEx on the jacknet and had them send my tools out. "I wasn't told this was a removal. A removal requires tools and facilities that I do not have. A removal needs a medical doctor. I'm just an installer. Assembly-line stuff. I'm unskilled labor."

"Brother George does not want his jack removed. However, he requires it. We require it. He is a medical doctor and can assist you in that regard. He believes

he can work with you, which is why he requested you."

In the headspace, I ran to one of the phones and hit the hot button, but there was no dial tone.

The inky blackness of my headspace solidified into a curved stone wall, a cave with no entrance or exit. The homunculus tried to fly to the shadows, to the open networks, but slammed against the mental block and fell at my feet, twitching. The wetnurse knelt down to repair it. Outside, I was still, staring off into space.

"Ms. Angelakis?" Peter asked. He waved his hand in front of my face.

I stepped back up, my vision refocusing on the outside world. Peter's lips twitched silently. I wanted to rip his beard off, to feel the wiry hair in my hands, but the wetnurse sedated me. From a few feet under the floor, I felt George Proios's malfunctioning jack repeating one recursive command, one thought, over and over. In the corner of my headspace, I sensed him, like an old file I'd forgotten to delete, like a shadow on a cave wall.

("Step up, there's a world out there!" Victor Mature demanded. Kelly snapped to attention.)

"He's having his jack removed," I said to Peter. "How can he assist me?" The wetnurse ran about my headspace with cold compresses, but I got all flushed anyway. I could feel the heat pouring from my skin. Peter's expression didn't change; his eyes were distant and his body still but for his twitching lips.

"You do not need his help, just his consent," he said, finally. His voice retained that dreamy, flat tone, like a computer or a jazz radio announcer.

"Jesus forgive me!" I said. "I'm not going to break half a dozen laws and risk a man's . . ." I stopped and realized what I had just said.

(The homunculus flew about Kelly's head, a flashing red siren strapped to its head. "Warning, warning," it screeched. Kelly waved it away.)

Peter didn't smile. I licked a line of sweat off my top lip. In the headspace, My Pet Dog went sniffing after shadows. Downstairs, he was in a basement cell: George Proios. One command line, one task endlessly replicated by his Sinner Self, the Holy Spirit, and A Young Lamb, the monk's custom acumen agents. Some religious people even installed Jesus Christ masques, to keep them from fucking strange women or swearing. I'd never seen anyone with a lamb before. Certainly not one standing alongside a dove bathed in nearly blinding light and a haggard,

leprous monk who was mindlessly repeating "O Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, Jesus forgive me, a miserable sinner." My homunculus slapped its little claw against its forehead ("We could have had a V8!"). Then the monk turned to me, staring with his dead eyes, and linked our jacks. The shadow on the cave wall of my headspace began to murmur a prayer. Jesus forgive me, a miserable sinner, so I won't have to think anymore.

(Kelly Angelakis, age 14. She was thin and underdeveloped, with a huge mop of black curls splayed on the pillows. Her palm ran over her nude stomach, sliding down between her legs. Then guilt and bitter vomit filled her mouth.)

"I am sure you will help him, Ms. Angelakis. Brother George assures us that you are a good Greek girl. Also, he tells us that the state he is experiencing is . . . how would one put it . . . contagious, no?" He turned on his heel and led me to my room. I glanced up at the back of his neck, just to make sure. Smooth skin and wiry black hair. No jack.

They were all dry here. I could only sense one other signal, the drumbeat of George Proios and his begging cybernetic prayer. It overwhelmed his system and hit mine hard too. The homunculus scratched at headspace's new walls, trying to get out, but it was grounded. I was cut off from the network now, thanks to distance, granite, and the white noise chant of "Jesus forgive me." He had trapped me. The last message he'd allowed out was for the equipment I needed.

In the headspace, Victor Mature stepped into view. "Kelly, listen. We can get through this. Don't forget how good you are. Proios sounds dangerous, but he's going to let you knock him out and uninstall his jack. We can do it and then we'll be able to call the police, the sysops, the FBI. All we have to do is take it easy for a few hours, do a job just like we were planning, and then we can leave. And all we need to do to succeed is not fall apart right now." I opened my mouth to answer him like he was standing next to me, then caught myself.

(My Pet Dog whimpered, knowing that even if the company was interested in Kelly's location, it would be cheaper to hire some 13-year-old right out of college to replace her than to waste the copter fuel on retrieving her. Kids worked more cheaply and had a useful decade in them before burning out. And everyone was too busy to worry about Kelly or where she was anyway.)

My room was spartan, with blank walls, a cot, and a small table where a candle, a Bible, and a bunch of grapes were laid out for me. A water cooler bubbled to itself on the opposite end of the room. My wetnurse suggested flipping through the New Testament, "purely to keep our mind on something else right now." I hadn't read a whole book in years, hadn't needed to. I flipped through the pages and ran my palms over the vellum, and quickly sliced my finger open on the gold leaf of a page from Revelation. I sucked on my finger for a few seconds, then decided to try something else. Being alone, without the net, was . . . disconcerting. Hell, it was scary.

I thought I'd to make a game of seeing how far I could spit grape seeds, but the grapes were seedless. I stretched out on the bed -- the mattress was hard and lumpy -- and closed my eyes. In the headspace, my ego agent brought out the old film projector and suggested a movie. I shrugged and pulled down the screen.

(Victor Mature took his place in front of the projection screen, the cave morphing about him into a Hollywood studio. My Pet Dog jumped into his arms and licked his face, "Oh, Won Ton Ton," the ego agent crooned, "you'll be perfect!" "Yeah, Nick, he sure will be!" someone called from offscreen.)

I squeezed my eyes shut tighter. I'd already seen this movie too many times. *Won Ton Ton, the Dog Who Saved Hollywood*, a cheesy bit of tinsel that I'd caught on television at three in the morning once, when I was seven. Victor Mature had played Nick. I was so happy to hear my father's name on TV. It was either Victor Mature or Santa Claus, so I glommed onto Victor.

George Proios was still in my mind. He dug through my memories like someone picking through a bowl of pistachios.

(Kelly Angelakis, age 7. Nick Angelakis towered over her, a torn book in his hand, the pages falling around Kelly like feathers from a burst pillow. "Why do you read this garbage! This is for retarded kids, Kalliope, with the space ships and pointy ears. What is he supposed to be," -- the back of the hand slapped the cover of the novel -- "the devil?"

From the kitchen, Vasso Angelakis called out "Leave her alone, let her read what she wants!"

"I'm trying to raise my daughter right!" Nick shouted back.)

Childhood was another movie I had seen too many times already. I took a deep breath, pulled myself up out of bed, and hit the hallway. Peter was waiting for me, his eyes wide with confusion, his lips still going, and a package in his hands.

"Ms. Angelakis?"

"Come on, let's go see Proios now. He's doing . . . something."

"What?"

". . . Praying!"

"Well, yes, I certainly hope so," Peter said, glancing out one of the dark windows in the hallway. "It has been only four minutes since I showed you the room. Please, try to get some rest. I brought you blankets. I'll come for you after morning prayers. I'm sure your mail will be here by then."

There was no threat in his tone or body language, but I took a backward step into the room anyway. Then he said, "Will you need more blankets?"

"No, I'm fine." I closed the door. Goddamn, I needed to turn off my head, but Proios was digging through my old files. He introduced a virus into my headspace, one smarter than my wetnurse -- an artificial mental illness called existential angst. Bastard.

(Kelly Angelakis, age 17. The back of her head was shaved. Her father, now an inch shorter than she, shook his head slowly as she explained, "I can talk to people with it, access information. Everyone's going to have one, one of these days, just like the computer.")

"I never used the computer," Nick Angelakis said. "This is terrible. You want to talk to people? You can talk to me, you can talk to Mama, your friends in school. You should have learned Greek, if you wanted to talk to people. Your poor grandmother can't say two words to you.")

My eyes refocused from the blank walls of my headspace to the blank walls of the room. I decided that I would lie still and be perfectly silent, to listen to the building. That lasted two seconds. The homunculus flung itself against the headspace's cave walls again. Back to the grapes, this time making a game of how many I could fit into my mouth at once (fifteen!) but I started gagging and had to dig a few of them out of my mouth and crush the rest by pushing on my cheeks with my palms.

I had already used up my sleepytime with that damn nap on the helicopter. I counted the beats of a cricket chirping and then counted the holes in the ceiling tiles. One hundred and eighty-five holes per tile, thirty-eight tiles. Seven thousand and thirty ceiling tile holes in this room. The dimensions of the room and layout of the hallway suggested eight rooms of identical size on this floor. Was it dawn yet? Fifty-six thousand, two hundred and forty holes in the ceiling tiles on this floor. How many floors? Four.

Was it dawn yet? ("It is three fifteen ay em," the homunculus whispered.) Random facts littered headspace. Saint Nicholas (there's that name again) was the patron saint of Greece and of sailors. "And of prostitutes," the shadow on the cave wall whispered. Only twenty percent of the land in Greece is arable, while nearly ninety-two percent of Greece's population lives near the endless coastlines. (Jesus forgive me.)

I had been to church once, years ago, after my father died. It was a blur now, thanks to my jack and my busy little brain. The priest was mumbling in Greek and my jack was off, at mother's request -- three hours of processing time I'll never get back. No translation but the priest's own, which was incomplete. The line "Life is more elusive than a dream" was the only thing I remembered from the sermon. I haven't dreamed in eight years.

The night before my father -- not Dad, not Papa -- died, I slept with a boy named Thomas Smith. My Pet Dog dug a hole at my feet and found the old sensations, the breeze on my back, the moisture, the throbbing in my tired calves after a few minutes of squelching. Was it dawn yet? That's all I wanted to know then, and all I wanted to know now. It wasn't, though. ("It's three forty seven ay em," the homunculus whispered.) I gave up, closed my eyes, and actually, really, naturally slept. And I dreamed. I was taking a final exam after cutting class all semester. I was naked.

I awoke to a knock on the door, and was up in point two seconds. Brother Peter and I slipped past half a dozen other monks. Their footfalls were quiet enough, but it wasn't the sound of six dryboys, it was the lockstep beat of a jacked workplace. And the murmuring, the lips, each man I passed was muttering to himself. I glanced at the backs of their necks as they passed, but there were no jacks to be seen. Dry as a bone, and dry to the bone. But every one of them was tied to some jacknet, somewhere.

Peter had my FedEx package tucked under his arm and was marching down the hall, sending the hem of his cassock flying up to his knees. I was faster, though, and kept stepping on his heels.

"Brother Peter," I said, "you do realize, of course, that when I get back to the city, I'm going to put you on report. Not just for demanding this highly irregular removal, but for kidnapping me! This is contract under false pretenses, this is misallocation of processing time, this is wire fraud--"

"Please help him." He handed me the package and nodded towards a flight of steps leading down into a basement. "Go on."

"You're not coming with me?" I asked him. "How can I trust you on any of this? Heck, how can you trust me, I can go down there and lobotomize him." Peter shrugged and mumbled something again. In headspace, I heard Proios's own voice chanting, "O Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, Jesus forgive me, a miserable sinner." The ego agent joined in the chant, in Victor Mature's dusky tones. My Pet Dog howled.

Then I realized that Peter hadn't been mumbling to himself. He had been reciting the same prayer as George, the same as the six other monks marching down the hall. The homunculus perched on my shoulder and held out a headspace

lantern. In the real world, my pupils instantly adjusted to the dark and I walked down the steps.

George Proios looked just like the monk I had seen in the crosstought, and his shadow was splayed against the stone wall of the basement, just like it was in my headspace. His beard was long and matted, held against his chest by his own sweat and grime. He smiled.

("Jesus forgive me," the wetnurse muttered, and performed a preliminary diagnosis on our subject).

His lips weren't moving. I realized then that mine were. That upstairs, Peter's still were. That every monk was saying a little prayer. They were always saying a little prayer. Now I was too, I was on a new jacknet. Except there was no jack necessary, and no net.

"Have you found God?" George asked.

"I'm here to remove your jack."

He didn't say anything for a long moment. Then he nodded towards a small table. A slice of bread sat there, not doing much. The words "Have you eaten?" came from somewhere -- headspace or real world, I didn't know. He rose up and shuffled towards the table, split the piece in half and offered it to me. I looked down and my face flushed. I held a complete piece of bread in my hand, and George still had a full slice in his hand. "More?" He broke his piece in two again and offered me one of them. It was cold and heavy in my hand. The slice was whole, though, and now I had two pieces of bread. Two whole pieces of bread.

"I would like to remove the jack, and then leave," I said. I dropped the bread on the floor and took a step forward, My Pet Dog feeding me a conversational thread of icy professionalism designed to engender compliance.

"I have no wish for the jack to be removed," he said.

"It's broken. Malfunctioning. You're experiencing a severe cognitive loop, probably because of a physical defect in the jack's antenna array. I can't do a spinal intervention here, but without reception, your problem should alleviate itself," My Pet Dog said to me and I said to George.

George shrugged. "I do not have a problem. I pray without ceasing, as Scripture demands. I do what my brothers spend their adult lives attempting through privation and contemplation. One begins by praying as often as one can, on the

level of the spoken word. All the time, one must begin to pray, muttering, whispering, thinking. Finally, after long years one can literally pray without ceasing. One's thoughts are always with God, not with sin. I pray from the heart, not from the jack. I am serene." My Pet Dog opened the package and spread the instruments on the tabletop.

"Look," George said, grabbing the two pieces of bread from the table. "Look! How do you explain this? Science, no? Somehow? What, with your quantum something-or-other?" He waved his arms and shoved the bread under my nose. Spittle coated his beard, and his arms were as thin as twigs. With a conductor's flourish, he whipped the sleeves of his robe up to his elbows and threw the bread on the ground. I took a step forward. "Mesmerism, perhaps, no? My jack interfering with yours? Have you thought of sin this morning, my child? Are you at peace? Have you ever even breathed? Jesus have mercy on me, a miserable sinner. Jesus have mercy on you."

George knelt to the floor near my feet, his head near the bread. The Jesus Prayer had done it. Two pieces where there used to be one. The dusty crusts, my footprint impressed onto one of them, existed. Without having to buy or sell them, without eleven jobs to pay for them, without a jingle. A miracle, at my feet.

I slapped a patch on George's neck and he dropped like a few sticks wrapped in a rag. Maybe I could know God after all. No more existential angst, no more rushing from job to job, the fabled free lunch. The bread. I tapped into George's spine and began to draw the information from him. The inspiration from him. It was like breathing a rainbow, but I could taste bread and wine, flesh and blood, in my mouth.

("The Lord tells us in Thessalonians 5:17 to 'Pray without ceasing,'" George explained to Kelly. "Our brothers have spent their lives contemplating their navels, muttering the words to themselves, trying to never lose contact with God. But I couldn't. The world was too distracting, too earnest. So I had a pirate jack installed, and found a way. And I prayed so well that God allowed others to hear me as well."

It was world of the Godnet: all the jackless wonders out there with one job, one personality, and one little life each, the whole smelly superstitious lot of them. And now Kelly was jacked in too.)

With George unconscious and his netblock gone, the rest of yesterday's junkmail finally downloaded and hit my brain. The latest news, spinning into headspace like a shot of a newspaper in an old movie, let me know what I had been missing for the past few hours. War with the Midwest, wethead bias crimes against dryboys on the rise, sumo results, the GM workers' council calling for a strike, markets down. People had things to buy and sell, important pinhead opinions to howl across my brain. I was needed, necessary, a crucial memebucket for the best

the world had to offer, at low low interest rates. No thanks, I thought to myself (to myself, not some nano-neurological stooge!); I quit.

In headspace, I shot My Pet Dog. I shot him dead, and took over my body, once and for all.

Headspace crumbled and a noisy blackness buried me. I think I fell to my knees, or was it on my face? I couldn't breathe. My lips were clenched shut, but vomit poured into my mouth and through the gaps in my teeth. Then, in headspace, I felt the firm hand of my ego agent on the back of my neck, lifting me above the swirling advertisements, the dizzying dance of thousands of stock prices, and the casual emergencies of work and memos and updated job queues. I coughed up the liquid shit of it all and finally, finally, took a moment. And I breathed, and my breath was a prayer.

I turned to face my acumen. The light from Victor Mature's miner's helmet dazzled my eyes, but that was probably just the jack's way of explaining the stars I saw from the bump on my head. The homunculus flew overhead, clutching My Pet Dog's corpse in his claws. The wetnurse was standing on a stepladder as a waist-deep flood of information spilled into our little world.

"Guess what, gang," I said. "You're all fired. I don't need to work twenty-three point seven hours a day anymore, and neither does anyone else. God will provide." In headspace, I held up two pieces of miracle bread, and threw them to the floor. Then I fired my acumen agents. With my gun.

The jack removal took longer than I thought it would. The scalpel felt too heavy in my hands; my fingers were too stiff to move. My connection to the jacket was a distant scream, like a child left behind in a parking lot by his deranged parents. George's eyes were still open, in spite of the narcotic. What would he be like when he woke up? Would he still be tied into the Godnet, like the monks upstairs? Like me? An overheated Jesus guided my hands, and my thoughts. His face was red, and steam poured from his ears.

The police took my ego agents' posthumous statements. (Damn backups.) I heard their filing cabinet drawer slam shut and echo. They'd get to my case by the time I was ninety, if I lived that long. My dry cleaning was done and the menu for the next three weeks needed to be planned; provisions needed to be requisitioned. My apartment back in the city wanted to know if it could please water the plants. A personal ad wrote itself for me and begged for my eyeblink signature. Sneaky anarchist magnetizdats nipped at my ankles, demanding attention. Helicopter blades were talking to me, saying "hurry hurry hurry" with the whip of wind. I had a deadline to meet. One deadline a second, every second, for the rest of my life.

("Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me, a miserable sinner' is as powerful for its

cadence as it is for its content. Once integrated into the head, it is actually hard to remove. Rather, one begins to receive, the monks say, messages from God," Kelly said, mimicking the sing-song of the prayer.)

I sent the jacknet a final, very important message, the same one George had sent me. Jesus forgive me, a miserable sinner. I reached behind my neck and blindly disconnected my jack. I was alone, but for the constant prayer on my lips and the love for every man and woman in the world. The Godnet.

I ate a sandwich and sat on the hill just outside the monastery, waiting for the helicopter. Everyone in the Godnet ate that sandwich, the two pieces of bread coming straight from George's miracle -- after I brushed the dirt off of them, of course. And I tasted gyros in Cyprus, kimchi in Pyongyang, and injera in Addis Ababa. And I even felt the tickle of a patch here and exhaust-stained breakfast coffee there, from the first jacknetters to be infected with the God virus. Information wasn't a horrible flood of jingles and logos and unfair trades of wayward seconds of processing time any more; it was a smile, a wave, a breeze, a broken leg. Even the dying felt good, because there was always a birth right behind it.

It was odd, being alone, but not at all scary anymore. It was odd, being one with the world and everyone in it. It was hard, eating a sandwich and incessantly muttering the prayer at the same time. It was nice, though, to know that the Godnet would be giving me food and water and love and a place to live. Miracle bread for everyone. I heard angels' wings, but they were really only the spinning rotors of the copter.

The trip back. I spoke with the pilot. She had kids. She played the cello. She'd been raped once, at 13, but was healing now, and her lips moved with an invisible prayer. Her jack was cold and nearly dormant, buzzing with low-grade euphoria. We were just in range of the city, and I could already hear the Jesus Prayer -- the God virus -- in the ear of every poor jacked bastard in town. It was all prayer now; they shut down the news, the soaps, and even the ads. The reporters were too busy taking time off to report on the collapse of the economy, the wine flowing from the public urinals, the lame walking, the stupid finally getting a clue, the kids actually sleeping -- really really sleeping and then getting up because it was morning, not because it was time for their shifts. As we flew down into the city, the sun rose into the already-shrinking pool of brown smog that sat atop the skyline like a bad toupee. Morning. Not work or betweenwork or morework. I knew what time of day it was.