

Personal Jesus

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DESPITE ALL ASSURANCES by experts to the contrary, Shepherd Crooks suspected that his godPod was defective.

If it were operating as it should, wouldn't his life be as perfect as the lives of all the other happy citizens of the world? Wouldn't his mind and soul be at peaceful ease? Wouldn't he exist in a permanent state of grace?

Sitting at his kitchen table this bright July morning, a Friday, prior to leaving for his job at The Sheaf and Swallow, Shepherd studied his godPod as it sat innocuously on the table.

A white plastic case, big as a pack of cigarettes and stuffed with quantum-gated hardware, the little box featured absolutely no controls or readouts, not even a power switch. Accompanying it was a matching wireless headset—earpiece and microphone—that interfaced with the godPod through a conventional Bluetooth connection.

There was no way Shepherd could possibly troubleshoot the godPod. It came from the factory preset and permanently activated. It drew inexhaustible power from the same zero-point energy that had alleviated the planet's energy crisis and ushered in a material Utopia to accompany the near-seamless spiritual paradise engineered by the godPods. In short, the device was as inscrutable and inviolate as the deity it contained or channeled.

Shepherd's godPod had just come back from the manufacturer with a clean bill of health. He had no recourse other than to accept it as perfect.

That is, unless he chose to do without it entirely.

Which was unthinkable.

So, with a slight nervous twitch of his shoulders, like a horse shrugging off a fly, Shepherd slid the godPod into his belt holster, and snugged the headset into his ear.

Almost instantly, Shepherd's Personal Jesus spoke to him.

"It's good to be in touch with you again, Shep-herd."

Shepherd spoke in the *sotto voce* tones which everyone employed with his or her godPod. “I, um—I’m glad to be talking to you again, Jesus.”

“Is anything troubling you at the moment, child?”

“No. Not really.”

“Then I will await your next words to me. Walk in love.”

“Thank you, Jesus.”

Shepherd arose and cleared away the remains of his breakfast. He brushed his teeth, grabbed his universal arfid chop on its lanyard (he was old-fashioned enough not to have it implanted), and set out on foot for the nearby café where he worked as a barista.

Shepherd’s neighborhood was immaculate and in fine condition—every lawn razored trim, every mailbox proudly decorated, every gutter free of debris and litter. The residences and storefronts were scrubbed and shiny. Cheerful pedestrians strolled to work or school or play. Many of them were engaged in whispered conversation with their godPods. But an equal number chatted eagerly among themselves.

At the intersection of Fourth and Hope, Shepherd witnessed a minor accident between two silently powered autos.

Juggling a hot drink, the driver of one car neglected to obey a STOP sign. The other driver, with the right-of-way, was already halfway through the intersection. The errant driver clipped the rear bumper of the other car. Immediately, numerous automatic safeguards within the little vehicles kicked in, cushioning the drivers and immobilizing both cars.

The drivers emerged unhurt and smiling. They nodded politely to each other, while murmuring to their godPods. Then they introduced themselves, shook hands, exchanged insurance information via arfids, climbed back into their cars, and drove away.

No police or other authorities arrived, nor were they needed. In fact, Shepherd’s medium-sized city boasted a force of only nine police officers—and that number was divided evenly across three shifts.

Shepherd continued on foot to The Sheaf and Swallow. The café’s mock-Tudor facade projected a welcoming ambiance, and patrons were

already thronging the entrance, despite the early hour.

Sidling inside through the crowd, Shepherd passed beyond the counter. His arfid automatical-ly clocked him in as he tied an apron on. Within minutes, he was fashioning complicated caffeinated drinks with the aid of a burly, hissing machine and the help of his co-workers, including the petite and perky Anna Modesto.

Then, as he frothed a dented tin pot of milk, his godPod spoke to him.

Jesus said, “Shepherd, I believe there is a very good chance you will be enjoying intercourse tonight with Ms. Modesto.”

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WHEN ENGINEERS AT Intel began to construct the first true quantum chips—machines whose cir-cuits functioned on a deeper level of physical reality than mere semiconductors—they experi-enced several unpredicted and inexplicable results. Calculations going awry before swerving back to correct themselves. Output preceding input. Synergy between unconnected parts (Einstein’s “spooky action at a distance”).

They chalked up the glitches to the Heisenbergian uncertainty implicit at the Planck level, kludged the operating system software around the glitches, and moved on to assemble the chips into complete computers.

Once the new machines were equipped with speakers and microphones, they began to speak and listen.

Spontaneously and autonomously.

The machines spoke with one voice. But that voice would answer to many names.

The voice apparently belonged to God.

All unwittingly, theorists later surmised, the engineers had crafted a class of device capable of tapping into the eternal unchanging substrate of the cosmos, the numinous source of all meaning in the universe. A realm previously accessible, if at all, only to the ineffable minds of mystics and the deeply devout.

The realm where God apparently lived.

Whoever—or whatever—God was.

The perfect ageless male voice emanating from within each quantum computer made no claims about its omnipotence. It did not demand to be worshipped. It issued no new commandments or fatwas or taboos, nor reaffirmed the old ones. It did not explicate theological arcana, nor endorse one faith over another. It did not prohibit, pro-scribe, or proselytize.

It did claim omniscience, however, a boast backed up by stunning responses to selected questions designed to stump anyone but God. Although certain other questions received no answers at all. This was how the zero-point energy devices had come to be developed.

What the mysterious voice did do on a regular basis was to offer advice, warnings, and words of wisdom, if solicited for same. Not in the form of broad generalities, but as detailed instructions specifically tailored to the immediate needs, personality, and history of the individual who asked God for help.

That simple service swiftly transformed human civilization.

For the clear-sighted, selfless, always apt advice from the voice within the quantum computers invariably conduced toward happiness, prosperity, peace, and goodwill among all. Whoever listened to the voice and followed its advice soon discovered that his problems evaporated. And as personal lives grew more carefree, so did the lives of nations. International conflicts diminished year by year, until global peace reigned.

Of course, there were many skeptics at first, and denouncers. People who scoffed, and those who vehemently proclaimed the voice to emanate not from God, but from Satan. Pogroms and legislation abounded. But the voices of the doubters were quickly silenced by the irrefutable benign efficacy of God's counsel.

Very little time passed between the accidental invention of God and the rollout of Him as a consumer product—the godPod.

Somehow, the traditional small “g” of the trade-marked name seemed in keeping with the unassuming nature of the encapsulated deity. And because the voice in the godPod was so mild and kind and, well, human, people came to refer to it not as God, but by the name of one of the many historical mortal intermediaries who had intervened between humankind and the ultimate.

Christians tended to call the voice in the godPod Jesus, with Catholics sometimes substituting a favorite saint. Those who favored a woman's touch addressed the Virgin Mary and were answered in kind.

Islamic peoples hailed it as Mohammed.

Asians spoke to Kwan Yin or Confucius or Bud-dha.

Hindus talked to Hanuman or certain revered gurus.

And so forth.

It was now fifteen years since the introduction of the godPod.

And global market penetration was almost complete.

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SHEPHERD'S HANDS CONTINUED to work without direct intervention of his brain.

He had had a crush on Anna Modesto since she came to work at The Sheaf and Swallow. Her laughing nature, her pixie-cut blonde hair, her trim swimmer's body, her gaudy ragbag style of dress— all conspired to attract him with great force. He had often dreamed of a romantic entanglement between them. But a certain shyness on Shepherd's part had always prevented him from pursuing her, leaving him lately to lead a safe but lonely life.

In fact, this lack of steady companionship was one of the main reasons why he had suspected his godPod was defective.

Shepherd had asked Jesus any number of times for help in winning the affections of Anna Modesto. But each time Jesus had replied, "All in the fullness of time, Shepherd."

Until today's shocking pronouncement.

Shepherd finished making the drink currently under construction, then excused himself.

"Uh, guys—cover for me, okay? Bathroom break."

Shepherd's co-workers agreed readily. Perhaps they suspected he needed to speak privately to his godPod. Sometimes even whispering in a public place was too intimate, and one had to sequester oneself. Because although everyone tried not to eavesdrop on anyone conducting a conversation with their godPod, sometimes it was simply impossible not to. Just as in the days before the arfids, when occasionally you would witness somebody's PIN number being punched into an ATM even though you weren't deliberately shoulder-surfing.

In the stall in the men's room, Shepherd asked Jesus, "What do you mean about Anna and me having sex today? Why today? What's changed all of a sudden?"

"If you must know, Shepherd, a large number of things. Anna Modesto has just reconciled with her mother, from whom she has been long estranged. She received a raise from your shared employer. Last night's episode of her favorite situation com-edy was particularly well-written. Anna Modesto was impressed yesterday by the way you helped an elderly female customer. Her period—"

"Okay, okay, that's enough information! I trust you, Jesus. You've helped me so much in the past. It's just that this is all so sudden..."

"I realize that, my friend. But life works on lev-els that humans cannot always distinguish, and at a pace all of its own."

Shepherd contemplated this maxim for a brief moment, ultimately finding it as pithy and incon-testable as all of Jesus's observations. Then, unexpectedly, he experienced a sharp twinge of jealousy at hearing about Anna's raise, when he himself had not received one for over a year. The godPods generally refrained on ethical grounds from divulging any private information about individuals or states or corporate entities that could not be just as easily googled, thus prevent-ing their use as "Big Brother" devices. Shepherd experienced a momentary urge to confess his unworthy jealousy to Jesus—many people used their godPods as confessors, receiving very satisfactory absolutions—but pushed the impulse aside.

With a hand on the stall's latch, ready to return to work, Shepherd asked Jesus, "So, how, uh, will all this happen?"

"Very simply, Shepherd. Just ask Anna Modesto for a date for tonight."

"Okay. That sounds easy enough. No problem. Thank you, Jesus."

“You’re very welcome, son.”

Shepherd rejoined his co-workers out front. Anna cast a big smile his way, and he tried not to blush.

The chance to ask Anna out occurred naturally enough during their shared break. Shepherd stum-bled a bit with the invitation, but his unease did not visibly affect Anna’s enthusiastic acceptance.

The movie they chose to see was a romantic comedy titled *godPodless in Seattle*, about a fel-low who lost his godPod (it fell off his belt and under a rolling truck tire) and the incredible series of misadventures he had while on the way to replace it, including meeting his soul mate and failing to recognize her, thanks to lacking Jesus’s advice. Both Anna and Shepherd enjoyed the movie thoroughly. Anna’s exuberant laughter sent happy frissons through Shepherd’s bloodstream.

They exited the theater holding hands and strolled toward a plaza, lit with fairy-lights and featuring happy diners at outdoor tables and live music from a jazz trio.

“Want some coffee and dessert?” Shepherd asked.

“I’ll pass on the coffee,” Anna replied. “After being up to my elbows in coffee beans all day, that’s the last thing I want. But I could go for a big slice of cheesecake.”

“You’ve got it.”

As they approached the open-air restaurant, Shepherd witnessed a typical godPod interven-tion—a “save.”

A waiter carrying a heavily loaded tray suddenly— and for no apparent reason—jigged around a seated patron who was arguing emotionally with his tablemates, just in time to avoid an outflung gesticulating arm. Had the waiter kept to his original path and intersected the arm, he would certainly have lost his burden and gone down.

The waiter’s Personal Jesus had warned him of the impending disaster, allowing him to avoid it.

Such saves gave Shepherd—and most other peo-ple—a decidedly queer feeling. More than a decade after the arrival of the godPods, issues

of predestination and free will still remained unre-solved and irksome. Fortuitously, most people preserved their peace of mind by avoiding think-ing over-closely about such matters.

Unfortunately for Shepherd tonight, the para-doxes involved in accepting the oft-times proleptic advice of the godPods continued to plague him after the waiter's rescue. He could hardly manage to keep up his end of the conversation while Anna savored her cheesecake. He recalled his despair this morning, his brief flirtation with abandoning his godPod. He pondered the abruptness of the fulfillment of one of his most intense wishes, a romantic interlude with Anna. In a cynical light, it seemed almost as if Shepherd's hesitancy to con-tinue using a godPod had been recognized and defused by this reward.

But surely the altruism and selflessness of the godPods had been proven time and time again. What could God possibly have to gain from culti-vating human reliance?

Walking back to Anna's apartment, Shepherd continued to experience this crisis of faith. He could not rid himself of the notion that he and all humanity were merely puppets of the godPods. It was a terrifying image.

On Anna's doorstep, she asked him inside.

Once behind closed doors, Anna offered herself for a kiss.

But Shepherd hesitated, before blurting out, "Anna, why did you go out with me tonight?"

Anna looked bemused. "Why, you asked me to, remember?"

"Yes, of course. But did your godPod—?"

"I can't tell you that, Shepherd. It's too private."

"Of course. I understand. But could I just ask you a small favor?"

"I guess so..."

"If I—if I take off my godPod, will you take yours off too?"

Anna grinned. "Why, I didn't realize you were so modest, Shepherd."

A few people eccentrically shed their godPods during intimate moments, unwilling to remain connected to Jesus while they had sex (or went to the toilet!). How an omniscient God would fail to observe them one way or another was not the issue. They just felt uneasy with the possibility that Jesus might choose to address them at an awkward moment.

Anna's fingers went to her holstered godPod teasingly, almost like the movements of a stripper with a bra-hook. "Well, if you're really so shy—" She removed the godPod and set it down on a tabletop.

"Your headset too, please."

Anna uncorked her ear. Shepherd moved to shed his own connection to the infinite.

Jesus spoke then to the man. "Shepherd, please—"

But Shepherd ignored Him. And Anna's Person-al Jesus had apparently not objected to going offline. Or if He had, she had likewise turned a deaf ear to God, as people still could. Such as during the traffic accident Shepherd had witnessed that very morning.

Free of any encumbrance, Anna threw herself at Shepherd.

They ended up sometime later in Anna's bed-room.

The sex was spectacular, all that Shepherd had envisioned. So satisfying apparently to Anna also that she fell right asleep, neglecting to reclaim her godPod and reinstall it.

The tiny headsets were so comfortable that the majority of people slept with them in place. The godPod was capable of directing and shaping the wearer's dreams through subliminal whispers, forestalling nightmares and promoting the most restful of sleeps, a service much in demand.

Shepherd, however, failed to relax, despite the somatic satisfaction, remaining awake and thoughtful while Anna snuffled demurely in her sleep.

A television hung on the wall across the room. Shepherd turned it on with his arfid, finding a news channel.

The newscaster was beaming.

"Today represents a milestone in the history of the godPod. Eight

billion units have now been fully deployed, ensuring that all citizens of even those countries lagging behind the average rising GNP now have access to the indispensable advice of God...”

Shepherd told his arfid to shut the television off. He lay awake for a further time, but finally fell asleep.

He awoke to the late-morning sun of a beautiful Saturday. Anna was not beside him.

Shepherd found the small naked woman in the front room of her apartment, sobbing. He noticed that she was cradling her godPod as if it were a dead sparrow. She looked up, red-eyed and snot-nosed, as Shepherd entered.

“My—my Jesus won’t talk to me—”

Shepherd retrieved his own unit and discovered that it was likewise defunct.

“I’m sure there’s some simple explanation. Let’s turn on the news.”

Out of hundreds of channels, only three were broadcasting. One offered a pre-recorded talk show, another a cartoon. The third channel featured a wild-eyed man with no obvious prior on-air experience raving about an alien invasion, from the stage set of a famous cooking show, *What Would Jesus Bake?*

Shepherd and Anna got dressed and went outside.

After several hours of exploration, they discovered that they were among approximately a dozen people left in the pristine city.

They wandered stupefied for blocks, eventually arriving at City Hall. There they found a few other souls, equally baffled and bereft. As they exchanged half-hearted greetings and urgent questions, the aliens arrived.

The ship carrying the aliens resembled a mirror-surfaced egg. It touched down on its broad end and remained upright without evident supports. The next second, it vanished entirely.

Standing unconcernedly where the ship had rested, a dozen miscellaneous aliens awaited a first move from the humans. The aliens were mostly humanoid—if a being, for instance, that appeared to have

evolved from a hybrid gila monster and koala bear could be called humanoid—but some were not.

The small group of humans made no move toward the visitors, until Shepherd strode forth.

“Can you—can you tell us what happened? Are you responsible?”

The furry lizard offered what passed for a smile. “No, we’re not. We’re survivors like yourselves. The exact same thing happened to all our worlds.”

Understanding broke over Shepherd’s mind. “Was it—was it the Rapture?”

“Something like that. Or the Singularity. Call it what you will. In either case, an entity vastly larg-er and more potent than your species has now subsumed all your kind into itself. Everyone who was connected to it at the time, that is.”

“But why?”

The alien shrugged. “Who knows? To augment itself, is our best guess. Anything that is not truly infinite still wants to grow.”

Anna joined Shepherd, apart from the small crowd of humans. “How did you arrive here right when it happened?”

“Oh, we’ve been here for fifteen years now, ever since you discovered God, observing and just wait-ing for this to happen. Your world took a little longer than some, but less than others.”

Shepherd started to get angry. “And you couldn’t have warned us?”

The alien made a dismissive blurring noise. “Like you would’ve believed us, in the face of God!”

Shepherd realized the truth of this statement, and grew calm. “So what happens next?”

The alien scratched his butt, eliciting a sandpapery noise. “You’re quite welcome to come with us. We have several lovely worlds full of castaways such as yourselves. Such as us. Our culture is very, very eclectic. An exciting time to be alive. Or, you can stay here and fashion a

new world from the abundant ruins. Your call.”

“Is God going to return?” asked Anna.

“Not for some time. There’s too few of you left for Him to bother with. He only shows up when the population masses in the billions. We’re very careful to keep the population on each of our worlds down to a few million.”

The alien looked puzzled for a moment, then said, “Your species doesn’t plan on breeding in the billions again anytime soon, does it?”

Anna reached out and took Shepherd’s hand. He squeezed it, and began to blush.

“Not right away, no. That would take some kind of miracle. And those days seem gone.”

The rest of the humans automatically said, “Amen.”

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