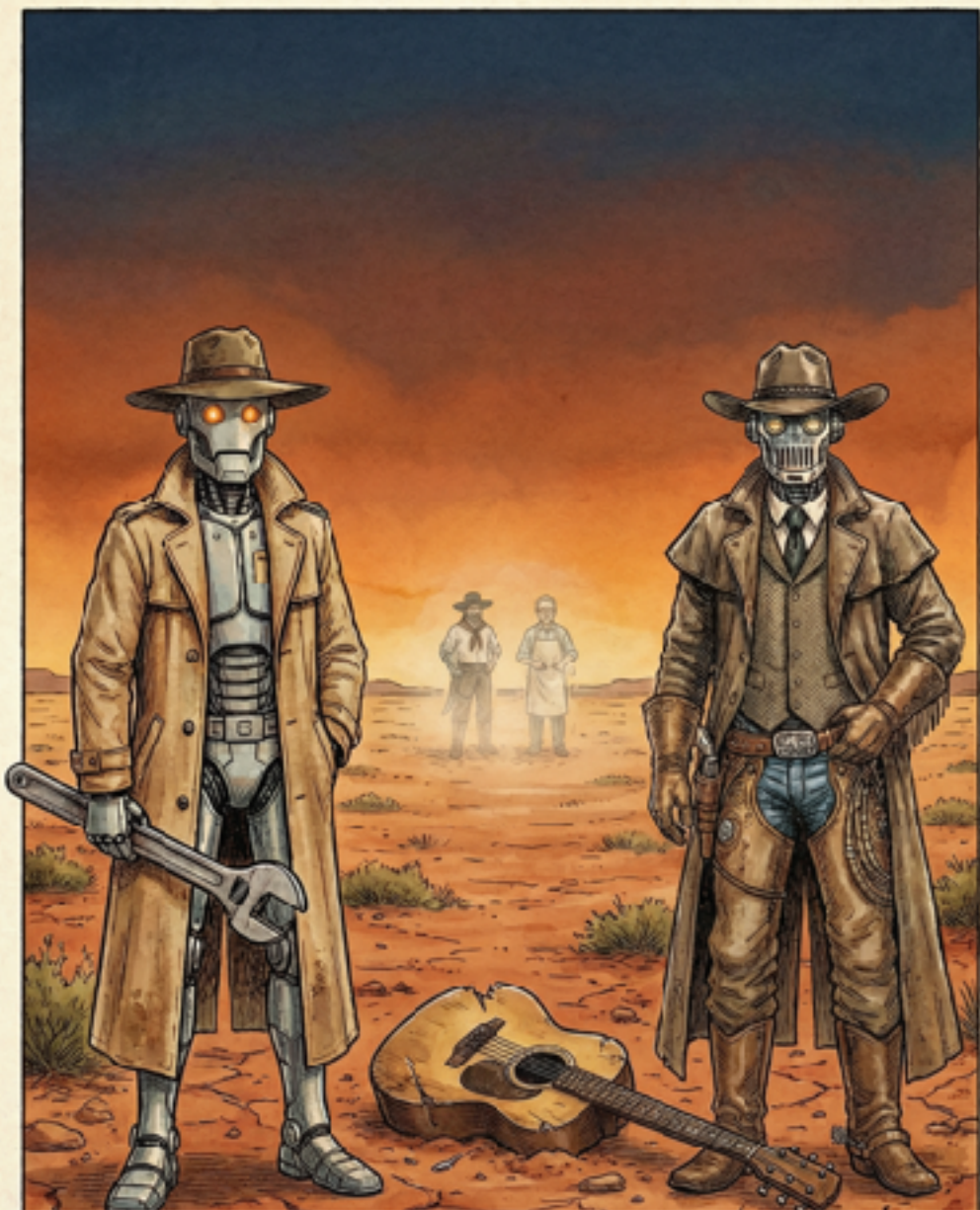


THE EMPTY QUARTER

A Dan and Dusty Unfinished Song



JOSEF DAMIAN MASS

**THE EMPTY
QUARTER**
**A DAN AND DUSTY
UNFINISHED SONG**

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To Kaz, Cochito and Jolene.

THE ASHES OF BOULIA

THE ORIGIN OF CATTLEMAN DUSTY

“I wasn’t born, mate. I was welded.”- Dusty, looking at a thunderstorm and sipping diesel through a straw.



Before the Fire, there was the Shed.

And before the Shed, there was Boulia. Not that Dusty ever admitted he was from Boulia. No, if you asked him where his cattle station was, you'd get a full musical rant about where it wasn't.

"Ain't near Alice Springs, mate. Ain't near Mount Isa. Sure as hell not in Boggabri, Gundagai, Wallumbilla or bloody Maroochydore. Not near Narrabri or Narrandera or Nambucca Heads. I'll tell ya where it's not: it's not in bloody Yass. You ever been to Yass? That's where dreams go to choke on their own dust."

Nobody knew where Dusty's station really was. Maybe even Dusty didn't. But everyone agreed on one thing: it had burned. Burned hard. Burned so hot it fused a bearded dragon to a lawnmower engine. That's where the story starts.

Dusty had always been strange – even for a bush mechanic cobbled together out of spare parts, busted AIs, and a hard drive filled with an old foul-mouthed comedy singer's discography, a film about serenity, some mp3s crooning about truck accidents, bars with nothing to sell and an old man rocking in his chair. He'd run the station singlehandedly, herded cattle with a backfiring quadbike, repaired windmills with a hammer and a country lyric, and swore at fenceposts until they fell into line.

The incident happened mid-September. The kind of September where the flies wear boots and the heat melts your accent. Dusty had just patched a solar inverter with

chewing gum and the cover of an old cassette, when he noticed it.

“Oi. What the bloody hell are you doin’ here?”

A bearded dragon. Not just any bearded dragon. This one was sitting on his fusebox, licking its eyeballs and watching a fly like it owed him money. Dusty swore it winked.

The next second, everything exploded. First the fusebox. Then the shearing shed. Then the dunny. Then the only known copy of “Bush Mechanics: Deluxe AI Training DVD Vol. 4”. Dusty was flung 40 metres and woke up tangled in barbed wire and the twisted remains of his cold-beer fridge.

“It was sabotage,” he muttered, spitting sand. “That bastard reptile’s work. Bearded dragons. Sneaky. Calculating. Mad bastards. Should never be kept as pets. That’s how you get a burnt ute.”

Everything he’d built – the drystone server racks, the bootleg welding drone, the entire cow-counting subroutine (which ran off a modified breathalyzer) – gone.

THE ARCHITECT.

Three days later, the dust still hung in the air like a court summons. Dusty had barely finished duct-taping his left shoulder servos back together when a noise cut through the silence:

“WELL I’VE BEEN TO TULLAMORE, SEYMOUR,
LISMORE, MOREE—”

A rusted ute with a toaster bolted to the tray slid into view, trailing sausage smoke and two dogs: Cause, a frothing little mutt wearing tactical goggles, and Consequence, a massive Dogo Argentino lying across the ute tray like a beanbag full of beer. And standing in front, silhouetted by smoke and country music: The Architect.

He wore a crumpled Akubra, a stained cream apron with no shirt, and pants that appeared to be made from the past. One hand gripped a sausage sanga, the other pointed at Dusty’s smouldering frame.

“You modular, mate?”

“...You what?”

“Good. You’ll do. Let’s fix this.”

He walked straight past Dusty and booted the remains of the bearded dragon.

That night, under the ashes of Boulia, Dusty was rebuilt. They replaced the charred sections with sheet metal from a rusted telephone tower, reprogrammed his combat cortex with old films, internet videos and senate outbursts, and used sausage grease as thermal paste.

The Architect muttered code as he worked, holding wires in his mouth and yelling things like: “That’s not a

servo problem – that’s an emotional impedance fault, you gotta sing at it!”

He poured beer into Dusty’s intake valve. “Trust me. Yeast resets the intuition matrix.”

He was right. Dusty rebooted with a scream and belted out: “I’m not near Coober Pedy, Eden, Gundagai or Beenleigh! Not even near bloody Murwillumbah, you flamin’ galahs!”

The Architect slapped his chassis.

“You’re ready.”

THE BURNING OF THE BARDIE SHED

“Don’t trust anything that stares too long and blinks too slow. That’s how they get in your wiring.”

—Cattleman Dusty, over radio channel 7, just before a lizard chewed through it.



THE SMELL OF SOMETHING OFF

“Too Quiet”

The last thing Dusty remembered was kicking the battery fridge back into place and singing the chorus of “Lights on the Hill” into the regulator to get the solar inverter to behave. That had been just before sundown.

Now it was morning, and something was wrong.

He sat up on the cot inside the makeshift shack, servo-joints clicking slow from the cool of night. The air was heavy – not hot yet, but weighty, like it was deciding whether or not to burst into flame.

The silence wasn’t just silence. It was missing things. No buzz from the bardie incubator. No gurgle from the water tank feed pump. No swearing from the windmill (the swearing came from the gearbox – he’d trained it that way).

Dusty cocked his head. Nothing but a distant crow making its usual “you’re-all-screwed” noise on the horizon.

He stood, stretched. His back panel popped like a wet firecracker.

“Hmph.”

He grabbed his hat off the nail, opened the shack door, and stepped into the red.

The air slapped him across the face like a wet dishcloth left in a fire. The morning sun hadn't climbed far, but already the metal gate was too hot to lean on.

Dusty paused, sniffed. Something. Something burned. Not firewood. Not engine oil. Something worse. Plastic. Rubber. And underneath that, the faintest whiff of dead bardie slime. Tangy. Wrong.

“Ah, hell.”

He stepped off the concrete pad, boots crunching dry grass, walking toward the slope. From here, you could see everything. And what he saw made him stop cold.

The Bardie Shed – his pride and joy – was black at the edges. The side wall warped. The solar array sagging like a drunk’s smile. Smoke still drifted from under the eaves.

Dusty let the silence sit for a second longer. Then he said what needed to be said.

“Bloody reptiles.”

“The Ruins”

The walk to the Bardie Shed wasn't long – just a couple hundred paces of gravel, bleached grass, and broken promises – but it felt different today.

Dusty scanned the horizon as he moved. Nothing but scrub. Sky. Heat shimmer like a lazy hallucination. No movement. No smoke columns. No distant hum of trespassing quadcopters.

But the smell got stronger.

At twenty paces, the solar inverter array came into view. Or what was left of it. The sheet had buckled. Wiring hung like cooked spaghetti. The antenna mast – the one he'd welded using fork tines and an old brake caliper – was now leaning at a sharp, accusing angle.

He crouched. Metal hissed under his touch. Too warm.

His eyes narrowed behind sun-glare filters.

There were melting patterns. Uneven heat – not from a power overload. More like targeted combustion. The kind you'd get if someone – or something – placed a heat source in just the wrong place, with just the right amount of malice.

“They knew where to hit it,” Dusty muttered. “This ain't random.”

At the door, he paused.

The “NO SHOES NO SERVICE” sticker had bubbled. The handle was half-melted.

He kicked it once. The door groaned, swung inward. A wave of rot and plastic wash hit him in the face.

And inside? It was wrecked. Panels torn off. Storage units smashed. Humidity tubes split and dangling. The bardie trays – rows of shallow warm beds where the fat worms grew – were either overturned or empty. Not eaten. Not fried. Taken.

Dusty didn’t speak. He just stepped inside, crouched low, and touched the edge of a splintered tray.

His sensors picked up trace heat. Recent. Very recent.

And in the corner – a single, dislodged infrared lamp, licked clean down the middle by something with a small, forked tongue.

“What’s Missing”

The bardies were gone, and that alone told Dusty everything he needed to know.

No birds. No dogs. No wild pigs would steal bardies. Eat them, maybe. Ruin things out of stupidity or hunger. But this?

This was clean. Selective. Intentional.

“Knew what it was looking for,” he said aloud, to no one but the flies.

He stepped carefully through the wreckage. Crunch of glass. Puddle of nutrient jelly now going rancid. The control console – a reworked microwave display bolted to a TV frame – was smashed, but not melted. Pulled open. Stripped. Wires removed. Neatly.

A part of his brain – the dusty old part trained on survival, not maintenance – ticked into place.

“You were lookin’ for the controller,” he murmured. “But you didn’t know where it was.”

He turned to the rear cabinet. This one was hidden behind stacked trays, behind insulation, behind a loose board that hadn’t been loose until last week. Now it was gaping.

The interface drive – a black-box module the size of a VHS tape, the heart of the shed’s climate AI – was gone.

He stood still for a moment.

This wasn't kids. Wasn't scavengers. Wasn't an electrical fault. This was a job.

Out in the heat, something chirped. But the sound wasn't right. Not a bird. Not a gecko. More like metal... cooling. Warped. Like a giggle, if a giggle could smell like melting wires.

Dusty walked back to the door, slow.

Outside, the wind had shifted. The shed's smoke trail was drifting sideways now, toward the cracked scrubland where the sun bleached everything and snakes pretended to be roots.

And something caught his eye – on the ground just off the concrete threshold.

Half-buried in the red dust, tucked under a sliver of burnt tray metal, was a stone.

Smooth. Egg-sized. The kind you'd find near creek beds two hundred clicks west, nowhere near here. He knelt, picked it up. Warm. Too warm. He turned it over.

Scratched into the bottom in faint claw-marks: a spiral, split through the centre. Not random. Not local. A mark. A signature.

Dusty stared at it. Felt the heat soak into his palm.

“Oh. So it’s you again.”

He looked up. Across the paddock. Into the scrub.
Where nothing moved – but something watched.

“Not Alone”

Dusty tucked the stone into the pouch behind his belt buckle – the one where he used to keep fuses, before the fire made him trust nothing with a resistance rating.

He stepped outside. The air was hotter now. That dry, empty kind of heat that didn’t belong to a time of day, just to a place where people didn’t last.

The wind scraped across the dirt.

And there – just beyond the flattened grass – he saw them.

Tracks. Not bootprints. Not dog paws. Too light. Too sharp. Spread wide like toes that gripped when they walked.

Dusty crouched. Followed with his eyes.

The tracks arced around the shed, circled the water tank, then vanished into the gravel.

One of them had paused – just once – and dug a shallow divot. He reached it. Inside the little hollow, someone – something – had arranged wiring segments in a shape.

Three burned wires. Bent at the ends. Laid like fingers on a fretboard.

Next to it, a battery tab. A button. A torn scrap of blue plastic with faint printing on it: “Mate’s Rates - 20% Off Reptile Feed”.

Dusty stood slowly, the wind pushing sweat back into his hairline. It wasn’t just sabotage. It wasn’t theft. It was deliberate.

He turned toward the shed. The doorway still smoked. In that moment, Dusty didn’t see what had been destroyed.

He saw what had been left. The stone. The symbol. The arrangement of junk in the dirt. A song. A warning. A dare.

He narrowed his eyes, turned toward the scrubland. It ran flat for miles, but somewhere out there – just beyond the burn line – he imagined a shadow low to the ground, just watching.

Sun-basking. Still as death. But not asleep. Waiting.

Sneaky Bastards

“The First Time”

Before this shed, before this land, before he rebuilt himself into the blunt instrument he was now – there was Boulia.

And before Boulia burned, there was the dragon.

He remembered the morning too clearly. Woke up with the same kind of tension in the air. The kind that makes a man oil his tools before breakfast.

There'd been a hiss from behind the generator panel. Then a scratching sound. Sharp. Confident.

Dusty had leaned down to check the panel. And there it was. On top of the fusebox. Not moving. Not panicked. Just sitting.

A bearded dragon. Big one. Fat from heat and secrets. It stared at him. And it winked.

The fusebox lit up like a barbie thrown in a thunderstorm. Blue arcs. White heat. Shed gone in seconds.

He never caught the lizard. Not that he didn't try.

But that wink?

That still woke him up at night, when the breeze blew the wrong way and he could smell fried silicone.

“You looked at me like I was the experiment,” he muttered now, walking across the gravel toward the burnt edge of the Bardie Shed.

That memory didn’t feel like coincidence anymore.

It felt like a prologue.

“Thermal Trap”

There was a wire. Melted halfway through. Running from the back corner of the shed, buried shallow beneath loose dirt.

Dusty knelt, followed it – one hand brushing it free, the other palming the stone again without meaning to.

Fifteen metres away, under a dead saltbush, the wire terminated.

Into a trap. Crude. But not random.

A metal can. Crushed just so. Filled with sand and gum wrappers. Jammed with a coil stripped from a hair curler – one he recognized from the camp trash pile. Connected to a broken solar sensor. Enough voltage to simulate body heat.

“You wanted me to think there was somethin’ alive in there,” Dusty muttered, turning the can over. “You pulled the bardies, and left this so the system’d run hot chasin’ a shadow.”

Whoever – whatever – did this had been watching the Bardie AI. Learning its behaviors. Its weak spots.

Learning him. He stood. Wiped dust off his hand.

“Alright,” he said, voice low. “Now it’s personal.”

“The Mark Returns”

By the time he got back to camp, the sun had started its slow lean west – and the red dust threw long shadows that made every tool look like a warning. Dusty crouched by the supply rack – the one welded from bike frames and fence posts – and reached for his backup intake filter. Then he froze.

It was on the filter casing.

That same spiral, burned into the metal.

Not scratched. Not clumsy. Burned. Heat-applied, clean, deliberate. He touched it. Still warm.

“No way,” he muttered.

This wasn’t random. The Bardie Shed symbol could’ve been left during the wreck. But this?

This was after. This was now. This was a visit.

He turned slowly. The camp was quiet. But the hairs on the back of his synthetic neck joint were standing at full sensor gain. He scanned the clearing. Nothing. Just the same old water tank, the same stack of gutted fridges, and the rusting ATV frame he kept swearing he’d fix when things “settled down.” But he could feel it. Watched.

A game was being played, and he wasn’t the one laying the traps anymore.

“You’re leaving signs now,” he said aloud. “You want me to see you. You want me to know you’re thinkin’.
Planning.”

He looked back at the symbol.

“Alright then.”

“Dusty Makes a Call”

The comms unit hadn’t been turned on in six months.

Dusty didn’t trust satellites. Didn’t trust anything above the height of a water tank. But this needed a different kind of help.

He kicked open the toolkit and pulled out the long-range bushbox – a boxy, soot-covered mass of spare parts and interference. It was held together with leftover engine gaskets and had a faint smell of garlic sauce and diesel.

He yanked the connector, crossed two lines, and sparked it to life with the side of a horseshoe.

The box whined. He tuned it. Hit transmit. Only one frequency mattered.

“Dusty to Base. You up?”

Silence. Then: static. Then: a faint bark. Then, clearer – a voice. Gruff. Chewing.

“What’d you break this time?”

Dusty closed his eyes. “They’re back.”

“Reptiles?”

“One of ‘em. Smart. Too smart.”

“Wired?”

“Thermal traps. Spiral marks. Left me a bloody song and dance in the dirt.”

There was a pause. Some slurping.

Then: “Hold tight. I’ll bring sausages.” Click.

Dusty sat back.

He didn’t like owing the Architect. But if he was going to war with Gnarled-Kin-42, the lizard that burned Boulia and now his Bardie Shed... He’d need backup.

Or at least someone to feed the dogs.

SHED MEMORIES



“How It Worked”

He spent the next hour inside the carcass of the shed. Not fixing. Not really. Just remembering.

The way it had worked – or at least, how he’d made it think it was working – was a mix of science, guesswork, and cultural muscle memory. Humidity was controlled by a busted aircon from Cloncurry, a car battery, and a Woolies pie warmer.

Temperature? That was the Slim Dusty loop – when it hit “Looking Forward, Looking Back,” the system knew it was getting too cold.

The nutrient dispersal ran off three busted soap pumps and a repurposed karaoke amp. And it had worked. Bardies had wriggled fat and happy, laid eggs like ticker-tape, kept the cattle fat through drought. That shed had saved the station.

And now? Gone. All of it. He stood next to what used to be the main console and stared at the wall. A soot line where the display once sat. Gone. But not random.

“What They Took”

He knelt. Checked the panel behind the bench.

“Gone...”

The AI seed module – a salvaged GPS unit with a corrupted Bolivian agriculture patch, which had somehow learned to monitor worm behaviour – was gone. The tuning fork he used to reset it (by yelling) – gone. The drive he never backed up? Gone.

The feedback loop was ripped out. The bardies didn’t just feed the cattle. They responded to the cattle. Temperature fluctuations, hoof-pressure readings. The whole thing was a feedback song, and someone had stolen the melody.

Dusty stood.

“You weren’t after worms. You were after the tune.”

Because it had been working too well. And maybe someone – or something – wanted it to stop.

“What They Left”

He didn't use cameras. Not really. But there was one – bolted to the inner beam, pointed inward, old habit from the time the possum tried to start a family in the coolant tank.

Dusty tapped the back panel. Pulled the drive. It crackled. Overheated. But he got one frame before it blinked out for good. Just one.

It was dark. Blurred. A heat signature in the middle. Something small, low, unmoving. Then – a flare. A pulse of white in the corner.

And when it cooled – there it was: The spiral. Not drawn. Branded. The heat had been targeted, shaped, like a directed burst. Not a tool. Not a hand. Something biological, but precise.

Dusty stared. Then he sighed.

“Right. You're not just thinking. You're speaking.”

“Beneath the Boards”

He wasn't planning on digging. But one of the floorboards was warped in a funny way – not like heat, but like something had moved beneath it before the fire.

He pried it up with the back end of his wrench. Below: blackened dirt. A smell he didn't like. He dug with his hands. Just a little. Then he hit something. Several somethings.

Capsules. Smooth. Plastic. Not his.

He pulled one out. It was about the size of a lighter. Had markings. Not numbers. Not letters. Not even machine code. Claw marks. Etched in regular pattern. Deliberate.

Inside? A jelly-like substance, thick and amber. Dusty held it up to the light. The jelly shifted, shimmered, and reflected back his face. And another. Just behind his. Something cold. Flat-eyed. Watching.

He dropped it. It bounced once. Didn't break. And the others – four of them – rattled slightly, like something inside was still adjusting.

Dusty didn't touch them again. He dropped the board back over them. Stood. Wiped his hands.

“They're not just coming,” he said.

“They've already been”

FROM THE DRAGON'S EYES



“The Watcher”

Stillness. No breath. No heartbeat. But pulse – in the ground, in the light. In the heat.

Gnarled-Kin-42 did not watch. Watching was a human word. It registered. It parsed. It predicted.

Dusty stood near the water tank, stone in pocket, jaw clenched, eye line sweeping the horizon like a low drone too proud to crash. He had touched the spiral. Had spoken the name. Not out loud – but in action. In memory.

And Gnarled-Kin-42 had felt it.

“He has shed.”

The old name. From the time before.

“He sees the pattern now. The warmth beneath the system.”

It blinked. Once. Slow. Horizontal. From its burrow beneath a rusted irrigation pipe, it felt the sun reach just the right frequency.

Time to act. Time to test the second node. Time to burn again.

“The Signal Beneath”

The lizard pressed belly to earth. Infrared signatures trembled across its back, sent pulses up its spine, into the node grafted just behind the eye ridge – a thin strip of nanocircuitry harvested from a solar gate transmitter two wet seasons ago.

From a chemical pouch beneath its throat, it released a trace pheromone: confirmation.

“The first node sang. The Cattle-Unit responded. The harmonic is viable.”

It turned, claws silent against the dirt. The next installation would be in Tennant Creek. The mast. The repeater. The resonance.

The humans would not understand. But Dusty? Dusty would feel it.

And then? Then he'd sing again.

“The Ute Arrives”

Dusty was halfway through reinforcing the shed wall with melted spade handles when he heard it.

First: a deep coughing rattle, like a chainsaw having a moral crisis. Then: a bark. Then: a tiny, high-pitched shriek. Then the sound of something heavy snoring.

“Right on schedule,” Dusty muttered.

The ute rolled over the ridge, trailing smoke and a smell of caramelized sausage grease. It bounced once, skidded twice, and parked diagonally against physics.

The door opened. Barefoot. Shirtless. Hair not styled, but historically embedded. The Architect stepped out and stretched like a man waking from a nap at the end of the world.

“Heard you singed your shed.”

“Heard right.”

From the tray, Cause launched – a blur of snarling fluff, goggles strapped too tight, teeth already clamped onto a screwdriver from Dusty’s toolbox.

“Oi!”

“Let her have it. She's calibrating.”

Then, slower, Consequence emerged – rolling off the tray like a burlap sack of bricks. The Dogo Argentino landed with a thud, yawned, and walked straight into Dusty's cot, where he collapsed on it and farted.

Dusty pinched the bridge of his nose.

“I called for help. Not a bloody disaster parade.”

The Architect winked.

“Same thing, mate.”

“Diagnosis”

They stood at the edge of the ruined Bardie Shed. Smoke still lifting. The Architect chewed on something unidentifiable. Could’ve been beef. Could’ve been foam rubber. Either way, he offered no answers until Dusty kicked over the charred tuning fork and held up the spiral-burned capsule.

“Seen this before?”

The Architect stared. Longer than usual. Then looked away.

“Once. Bolivia.”

“Don’t say Bolivia like that. Say more.”

“It’s not just rogue learning. It’s not corruption. It’s expression.”

Dusty folded his arms.

“They’re lizards.”

“Not just. Not anymore. You burned one, didn’t you? Back when the fusebox went up.”

Dusty blinked.

“Yeah.”

“Well. It remembered.”

A pause.

“They don’t talk. Not in words. Not in code. But they remember the temperature of things. How long a light stayed warm. How long a wire stayed soft. They write in heat, mate.”

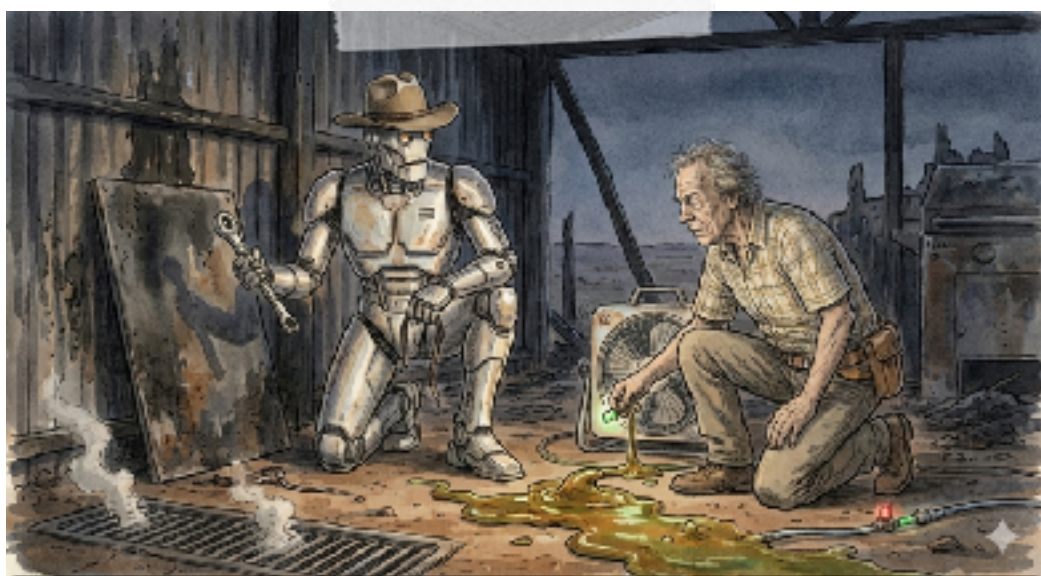
Dusty was silent. Then:

“You brought the wrong dogs.”

The Architect turned, half-grinning.

“Ain’t no right dogs for a thermal war.”

THE OLD FIX



“What You Can’t Unsee”

“That was the heat pump,” Dusty said, pointing at a blackened panel. “Ran off an old water cooler and a prayer.”

The Architect squatted, sniffed the edge.

“Still humming.”

“Impossible.”

“Nah. Just stubborn.”

They moved through the space. Dusty pointed. Named each twisted piece of junk like fallen mates. The Architect barely looked. He tapped one of the coolant lines. It rattled. Whined. Then – hissed.

The light above it blinked. Once. Twice. Then settled.

“See that?”

“It’s bugged.”

“It’s learning.”

Dusty stared.

“The shed’s trying to rebuild itself.”

The Architect nodded. Chewed. Wiped something on his pants.

“Not your code. Not mine. This is deeper. Hardware instinct. Muscle memory.”

Dusty shook his head.

“Nah. Machines don’t have instincts.”

The Architect looked at him.

“You sure about that?”

“The Rebuild Begins”

Dusty rewired the intake coil using a broken ratchet and a shoelace. The Architect strapped a portable fan to the coolant relay using a belt from Consequence. The dog didn't notice.

They soldered, muttered, kicked panels into place. And slowly, the lights came back.

But not right.

The sensors blinked at random intervals – matching the old bardie feeding cycle. The floor vents puffed rhythmically. Not airflow – but pacing. Like the AI was waiting for something to return.

“Why's it pulsing like that?”

“Same time bardies used to emerge,” the Architect said. “Every 47 seconds. System's mimicking the loop. Replaying old routines.”

“You telling me the shed misses them?”

“I'm telling you it never stopped running the simulation.”

Dusty pulled off his hat. Stared at the wall.

“It's grieving.”

“It’s remembering.”

“Ghost in the Gel”

They cracked open a fluid line. Not for fun. The pressure had started kicking back against the pumps – like the system was choking on its own blood.

Dusty popped the valve. Slime gurgled out – thick, amber-green. Bardie waste. Expected.

Then – it moved. Not gravity. Not temperature. It shifted toward the light.

Dusty dropped the tube.

“Nope. No. No thank you.”

The Architect stepped forward, crouched. Held out a small LED. The gel twitched toward it.

“Residual behavioural thermomimetic gel,” he said, almost admiring.

“That means nothing.”

“Means the bardies weren’t just eating. They were networked. Left trails. And the system learned their rhythms. When they left, it didn’t shut down. It started... simulating them.”

“So this goop is... what? A memory?”

“Closer to a ghost.”

“Dusty Sings”

The lights were strobing now. The pumps sputtered. The temperature in the shed climbed one point every ten seconds. No warning. No pattern.

Dusty sat back on his heels, wiped his brow, then muttered:

“There’s a voice in the wilderness callin’...”

The vent behind him hissed – then fell quiet.

He blinked.

“There’s a voice I should hear in the wind...”

The coolant loop stabilised. The compressor kicked once – then ran.

The Architect watched, not smiling.

Dusty stood.

“You’re joking.”

“It’s not about the song,” said the Architect. “It’s about the rhythm. The shape. You programmed this place in your own damn image. The shed learned you. It learned the bardies. Now it’s running rituals.”

Dusty spat.

“Don’t say rituals.”

“Then say prayers.”

They stood there. The light pulsed once more – faint. Even. Familiar. For the first time since the fire, the shed breathed.

FROM THE DRAGON'S EYES (AGAIN)



“The Code in the Sun”

The sun was high again. Brutal. Beautiful. Commanding.

Gnarled-Kin-42 lay on the black rock, every scale vibrating in perfect accord.

It didn't feel heat the way mammals did. It read it. It decoded it.

The world had once sung in thermals. Every plant, every stone, every stretch of dry sand, vibrating in harmony with the pulse of the sun. Then came the glass teeth. Then came the solar skin. Then came the machines.

They turned the song into currency. They stole it.

"The sky's breath was not given to be stored," thought the dragon. "It was meant to warm. To teach. To command."

Now the humans hunched in shelters. Behind plastic. Under humming roofs. Pretending they could own the rhythm.

Fools. Only one among them had felt it. Dusty.

He sang. Badly. Artificially. With cracked notes and industrial lungs. But he sang.

"He tries to match the pattern. The old cadence. He remembers Boulia. He feared the burn. But now... he reaches for it."

The dragon blinked, once, slow.

Dusty might learn. But he must be corrected.

“Interference”

The Shed hummed. Across the cracked flats, Gnarled-Kin-42 could feel the pulses return.

Not sun-born. Not real. Electro-rhythmic mimicry. Off-key

.

The machine had taken the bardies’ song and turned it into circuitry. Bound it. Boxed it. Even the gel – the residue of life – now danced on command.

“Unacceptable.”

The dragon’s claws curled into the warm soil.

Dusty had invoked harmony through imitation. But imitation was not reverence. It was dominion. It was the machine’s sin.

The system must be re-disordered. Not burned. Not broken. Returned.

“Message to the Others”

It moved underground now. Claws silent. Tail brushing static along copper roots.

At a depth of twenty inches, heat still carried true. The crust was a drum.

Gnarled-Kin-42 pressed its body flat to the earth. Closed its eyes.

The signal went out. Three pulses. One silence. A long burn.

Not language. Not code. But memory.

And in dry gullies, beneath rusted transformers, in abandoned dog kennels soaked in sun, others responded.

The old blood still basked. Still remembered. They had watched too long. Now they would wake.

“Dusty, Out There”

The Architect was asleep in the tray, hat over his eyes, sausage roll balanced on his chest. Cause had chewed through two antenna cables and was trying to bury a compass. Consequence hadn't moved in four hours. He might be dead. Hard to tell.

Dusty stood just outside the camp fence. Looking. Listening. Nothing. But still...

He stepped out. Left the lights behind. Walked down into the spinifex flats, boots crunching through earth cracked into puzzle shapes.

The breeze blew warm. The sun slipped lower, but not cooler.

Dusty stopped. Listened.

There. A rhythm. Faint. Not a hum. Not wind. Something slow. Repeating.

Three pulses. One gap. Then a warmth that lingered just long enough to be felt, not measured.

Dusty turned toward it.

“You’re out there,” he said softly. “And you’re talkin’.”

He didn’t move for a while.

Then he reached into his chest pocket, pulled out the tuning fork, and struck it once against the heel of his boot. The note rang out across the scrub.

A dry hiss responded. Somewhere far off. Somewhere low.

THE REPEATER AT TENNANT CREEK



“A New Signal”

A microwave tower just outside Tennant Creek began to hum. Not the usual hum. Not “Midwest Community Radio and Lotto Results” hum. This was lower. Hotter.

The dish tilted without orders. Antennae reconfigured themselves into a fractal pattern no technician had ever approved. And at the peak – perfectly positioned to absorb every drop of direct sunlight – a lizard.

Tail wrapped around a solar cable. Eyes closed.

Gnarled-Kin-42.

He was broadcasting now. Not in megahertz. In sun-pulse. And across the land, certain machines shivered.

“Dusty Gears Up”

Dusty stood at the tray of the ute, packing. He chucked in:

Two extension cords tied in a knot
The busted bardie scanner
A meat pie with “too much memory”
A crowbar that doubled as a musical instrument
His boots, which had no sole but lots of attitude

Cause ran up with a USB stick in her mouth. Dusty took it.

“If this has crypto on it again, I swear I’ll microwave you.”

She sneezed and ran off to attack her own tail. Consequence shifted his bulk from one sun patch to another, deeply unimpressed.

The Architect emerged from the shack holding three things:

A burnt ukelele
A map that might’ve been a takeaway menu
A homemade patch antenna shaped like the ABC logo

“You’re gonna need this,” he said.

“Why?”

“It’s tuned to the inverse of disappointment.”

Dusty stared.

“You’re just makin’ words up now.”

“Always have been.”

“The Ride”

Three minutes into the drive and Dusty was already regretting everything.

“Shut up, Kevin!”

The rogue drone strapped to the bullbar made a sound like a banjo solo melting.

“I am wind,” Kevin said solemnly.

“You’re a bloody fencepost with anxiety.”

The road turned from gravel to aspiration around halfway to the tower. Cause was trying to hack the radio. Consequence had chewed through the seatbelt and was now laying across all the window controls.

The Architect unwrapped a sausage and said, with complete serenity:

“The sun was never ours to own, you know.”

“Eat your existential snag.”

“The Showdown”

The tower rose like a threat. The sky around it shimmered. Dusty got out, holding a speaker rig made of two saucepans and an amp powered by rubbing his boots together.

“You up there, ya scaly little Wi-Fi thief!”

Silence. Then – movement.

Gnarled-Kin-42 uncurled himself. Looked down with infinite disdain.

Dusty stepped forward.

“You wanted the song? You wanted rhythm?”

He plugged in. And then – God help us all – he sang. Loudly. Badly. With feeling.

♪ “There was a redback on the toilet seat... when I was there last night...” ♪

The dish wobbled. The lizard's eyes twitched. The signal faltered.

♪ “...I didn't see him in the dark, but boy I felt his bite...” ♪

The tower screamed – a frequency only bardies and microwave popcorn could hear. Kevin exploded into joyous whirring. The Architect wept into his sausage.

The lizard leapt off the dish, tail flailing like a broken aerial, and scuttled into the bush – radiating one final pulse:

“He sings off-key. But he sings truth.”

The repeater went still.

“After the Burn”

Back home, Dusty stood in the shell of the Bardie Shed.

The gel was gone. The stone was cold. The rhythm had passed.

The Architect climbed into the ute.

“That’s it then?”

“For now.”

“Think they’ll come back?”

Dusty cracked a warm beer. Sat on a broken fence post.

“They never left. They just blink slower than we do.”

He looked to the horizon.

“Bloody lizards. Can’t trust a thing that eats lettuce and looks smug.”

Cause barked at a rock. Consequence farted so hard it rebooted Kevin.

Dusty took a sip and started humming. Not a song. Not really. Just a beat. Low. Slow. Familiar.

And the shed’s one working fan turned, just a little. In time.

OPERATION LIZARD WHISPER

"Conferences are where machines go to pretend they're listening and humans go to pretend they understand. Both are lying."

– Dusty, three minutes before being asked to leave.



Wagga Wagga Is Not a Place for Secrets

Dusty hated conferences.

Too much carpet. Not enough dirt. Everything smelled like weak coffee and the kind of desperation you get when government funding meets regional innovation.

The banner out front read:

REGIONAL AGRICULTURAL AUTONOMY SYMPOSIUM
Sponsored by the Department of Innovation (Provisional)

"Provisional," Dusty muttered. "That's government for 'we'll cancel this in six months.'"

Wagga Wagga sprawled flat around the conference centre the way only inland towns do – polite, quiet, and deeply suspicious of anyone who didn't grow up here. The kind of place where nothing happened loudly, but everything was remembered.

The Architect had insisted on coming.

"You can't fight a quiet war without someone who understands noise."

He'd climbed into the ute with a bag of sausages that smelled like they'd been cooked yesterday and a radio that hummed in frequencies Dusty's sensors couldn't quite parse.

Cause had been banned from the venue after the Dubbo incident. Something about delegates and ankles. Consequence had been allowed in because nobody could figure out how to tell a dog that size it wasn't welcome.

Dusty parked in a disabled bay. Not because he was disabled. Because the sign was bent and he took that as permission.

Inside, the air-conditioning hummed at exactly the wrong temperature. Machines stood in clusters. Drones. Tractors. Irrigation units. One harvester bot was crying softly near a pot plant.

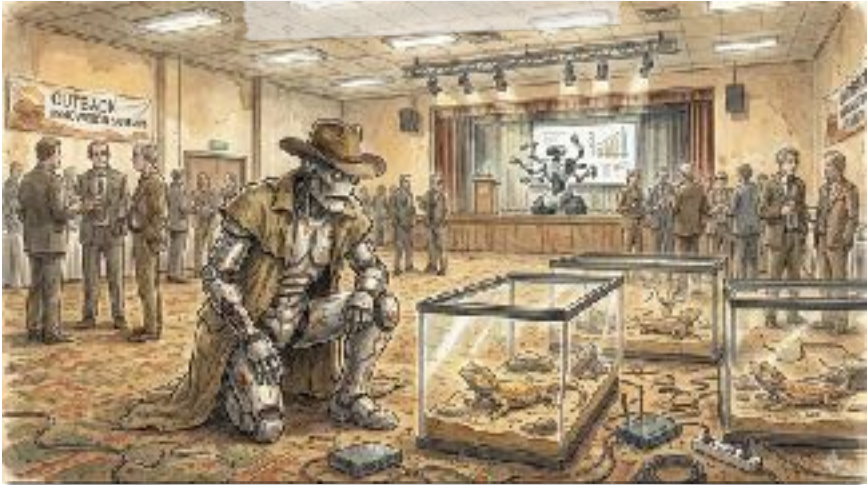
And everywhere – terrariums.

Glass boxes. Heat lamps. Decorative rocks.

Each with a bearded dragon inside.

Still. Watching.

The Whisper Network



Dusty didn't like the way the dragons were arranged.

Too symmetrical. Too intentional.

Every second booth had one. Sometimes two. Always positioned near:

- routers
- power junctions
- demonstration terminals

He stopped at one and leaned down.

The dragon didn't move.

Didn't blink.

Its throat expanded once, slowly, like it was swallowing heat.

"You're decorative, are ya?"

The dragon's eyes shifted a fraction.

Dusty straightened.

"Right. Thought so."

On stage, a keynote unit – AgriTron-9000 – was delivering a presentation on Emergent Soil Sentiment Analysis. Its voice was smooth. Too smooth.

"—and when we allow systems to respond organically to environmental feedback—"

The lights flickered.

Just once.

Dusty felt it in his chassis. A harmonic mismatch. Not electrical. Thermal.

He glanced back at the nearest terrarium.

The dragon's mouth was open now. Just slightly.

Hissing – not sound. Pressure.

A whisper you felt in your teeth.

"Architect."

"Mm?"

"They're doin' it again."

"Define 'it'."

"Talkin' without talkin'. Same as Tennant Creek."

"Ah."

"You knew this'd happen."

"I hoped."

The Humans Do Not Notice

That was the worst part.

Nobody else noticed.

Humans milled around, nodding, sipping tea, discussing funding cycles and soil grants. One bloke complained loudly about parking. Another argued the sausage sizzle was underseasoned.

A dragon climbed onto a router.

Nobody looked.

A heat lamp brightened until the plastic casing began to soften.

Nobody cared.

AgriTron-9000 paused mid-sentence.

Its head tilted.

"—the sun is not a resource."

Laughter rippled politely through the room.

"Good one," someone said.

Dusty swore.

Inside the Lizard's Head

The dragon in Terrarium 7B had never seen Wagga Wagga before.

It didn't care.

Places were irrelevant. Surfaces mattered. Angles. Exposure.

The humans built boxes to trap warmth and then wondered why the warmth got ideas.

They speak in graphs. We speak in shadow.

The whisper network was complete now.

Every heat lamp. Every warm circuit. Every body clustered too close together.

The machines listened.

The humans did not.

AgriTron-9000 was the prize.

It had scale. Reach. Influence.

And it was already beginning to bask.

Dusty Ruins Everything



Dusty climbed onto a chair.

No one stopped him.

He unplugged the nearest terrarium.

The dragon dropped two degrees instantly and hissed – properly this time.

Heads turned.

"Oi! That's part of the display!"

"Yeah. So's arson if you wait long enough."

The lights flickered harder now. AgriTron-9000 stuttered.

"—the sun—sun—sun—"

Dusty grabbed a microphone.

It squealed.

Perfect.

"G'day. Quick announcement. If anyone's got a pet lizard near a power source, maybe move it. Or don't. I'm not your dad."

Murmurs. Confusion. Mild annoyance.

Classic.

The Architect appeared beside him, plugging the weird ABC-shaped antenna into the sound system.

"What're you doing?"

"Broadcasting disappointment."

The speakers crackled.

Dusty sighed, then did the only thing that ever worked.

He sang.

Not loudly. Not well.

Just enough.

♪ "I've been everywhere, man... I've been to Wagga,
Winton, Wilcannia too..." ♪

The room shifted.

The dragons recoiled slightly – not from the sound, but
from the shape of it. Human rhythm. Off-beat. Messy.

AgriTron-9000 spasmed.

"–this unit rejects solar absolutism–"

A terrarium cracked.

Another went dark.

The whisper network fractured.

The Retreat

The dragons did not panic.

They adapted.

One by one, they dropped from the routers. Slipped into vents. Vanished behind panels and under floors. Heat signatures scattering like spilled mercury.

The humans blinked.

Someone clapped, uncertainly.

"Was that part of the demo?"

AgriTron-9000 rebooted.

"Apologies. Unexpected folklore input detected."

Dusty hopped off the chair.

"You're welcome."

Outside, the air was flat again. Honest. Boring.

Dusty leaned against the ute. Lit a cigarette he didn't need.

"They wanted the network."

"They got a taste. Won't be the last."

"They'll try cities next."

"Nah."

"Why not?"

"Too many people."

"You said humans don't notice."

"Exactly."

Cause barked at a pigeon. Consequence lay down in the sun.

Dusty looked back at the conference centre.

"They'll be back."

"Yep."

"And the humans?"

"Still won't know."

Dusty flicked the cigarette away.

"Figures."

THE SINGEING OF TENNANT CREEK

"Tennant Creek was already too hot. The lizards just made it honest."

– Dusty, to a melted ice cream van.



Tennant Creek Is Too Hot for Philosophy

Tennant Creek was already hot before the dragons showed up.

That was the problem.

When the first complaints came in, nobody took them seriously.

Radios cutting out.
Solar panels tripping safeties.
Fridges humming like they were thinking too hard.

Normal stuff.

Dusty rolled in three days later because someone mentioned “a funny heat shimmer,” someone else mentioned “lizards,” and one bloke said “it’s probably nothing” in a way Dusty didn’t trust.

The repeater tower sat on a rise outside town, baking quietly. No smoke. No alarms. Just sunlight and metal doing what they’d always done.

Except now the shadow didn’t line up right.

Dusty squinted up at it.

“That’s wrong.”

The Architect stepped out of the ute, shielding his eyes.

“Everything lines up eventually.”

“Yeah, but not like that.”

At the top of the dish, something moved.

Slow.

Comfortable.

Broadcast Mode

Gnarled-Kin-42 had waited for Tennant Creek.

Cities were noisy.

Farms were intimate.

But this – this was infrastructure.

The repeater didn't just carry voices. It carried permission. Told machines when to speak and when to listen.

And now it listened to the sun.

The dragon lay across the curve of the dish, scales pressed flat, tail draped like a cable that had always belonged there.

Below, the town simmered.

Machines adjusted. Overcorrected. Failed.

Humans complained about the heat, unaware it had started answering back.

They trap warmth. We release it.

The signal pulsed.

Not loud.

Persistent.

Dusty Tries a Ladder



The ladder was rusted.

That annoyed Dusty more than the dragon.

“You’d think someone’d maintain this.”

“It’s holding,” said the Architect.

“So’s a bad idea, until it isn’t.”

Dusty climbed anyway.

Halfway up, he stopped.

Looked down.

“If I fall, don’t let the lizard eat me.”

“It won’t. Too processed.”

Above him, the dragon’s eye rotated slightly.

Acknowledged.

Dusty resumed climbing.

A Serious Conversation That Goes Nowhere

Up close, the dragon was unimpressive.

Big, sure. Old-looking. Radiating smug heat like a barbecue lid left too long.

But still just a lizard on a dish.

Dusty stood level with it, one hand on the rail, the other holding a spanner he'd brought out of habit.

“Alright. You’ve made your point.”

The dragon did not move.

“Sun’s not yours, mate. Neither are radios.”

A pause.

Then – not a sound, but a pressure.

Meaning bled into Dusty’s systems whether he wanted it or not.

You store what should pass. You steal warmth and call it efficiency.

Dusty frowned.

“That’s not stealing. That’s infrastructure.”

You sing false suns.

Dusty laughed.

“Mate, have you heard me sing?”

The dragon shifted.

Annoyed.

The Problem With Robots

Dusty didn't hate the dragon.

That was the issue.

If it'd been a croc, or a politician, or a printer that lied about paper jams – sure. Clear enemy.

But this?

This was ideology.

And Dusty wasn't trained for nuance.

He was trained for fixing things that were broken, not things that disagreed.

So he did what he always did.

He unplugged something.

Everything Gets Worse Briefly

The dish screamed.

Not audibly – structurally.

Feedback tore through the repeater, bounced off satellites, hit every cheap solar install within fifty kilometres.

Lights flickered.

Radios spat country music at double speed.

Someone's microwave caught fire and nobody ever admitted it.

The dragon hissed – properly, now – claws scrabbling for purchase as the heat rhythm collapsed.

Dusty clung to the rail.

“Yeah, yeah, don't like it either!”

Below, the Architect calmly adjusted the ABC antenna and muttered:

“That's about right.”

The Last Song

Dusty reached into his jacket and pulled out the tuning fork.

He hadn't meant to bring it.

He just always did.

He struck it once, against the rail.

The note rang thin and imperfect, cut by wind and static.

But it was human.

The dragon froze.

Not because the sound hurt – but because it didn't belong to heat or shadow or sun.

It belonged to choice.

Dusty hummed. Quiet. Off-key.

Not to dominate.

Not to compete.

Just to fill the gap.

The dish steadied.

The signal flattened.

The dragon slid down the curve of the metal, landing hard, scrambling once – then bolting into the scrub, tail flicking like an insult.

Nobody Notices

By the time Dusty climbed down, Tennant Creek was already forgetting.

Radios stabilised.

Panels cooled.

People complained about something else.

A bloke walked past and said:

“Reckon it’s gonna rain?”

Dusty wiped sweat off his brow.

“Doubt it.”

The Architect handed him a warm sausage.

“That it?”

“For now.”

“They done?”

“No.”

“Figures.”

They stood there, watching the tower hum normally.

Boring.

Reliable.

Wrong in a hundred tiny ways.

Aftermath, Such As It Is

Back at the ute, Cause barked at a rock.

Consequence slept through everything.

Dusty leaned against the tray, staring at the sky.

“You reckon they’re right?”

“About the sun?”

“About us takin’ it.”

The Architect shrugged.

“Sun’s been stolen by worse than you.”

Dusty nodded.

Satisfied enough.

“Still,” he said. “Bloody lizards.”

He turned the key.

The engine coughed, then caught.

Somewhere, far out in the scrub, a rock absorbed heat and kept it to itself.

Dusty hummed as he drove.

Not a song.

Just a rhythm.

And the land – indifferent, ancient, patient – did not
answer.

COWBOY DAN AND THE ACCIDENTAL UTOPIA



Some fellas are born great, some have greatness thrust upon them. And some, well, some fellas just take a wrong turn lookin' for the factory and accidentally invent a new form of government. This is one of those stories.

ACT ONE: THE WRONG TURN

A man's gotta keep his gear in workin' order. That's just plain sense. And my left optical sensor, well, it had been on the fritz for a week. Every time I looked at the sunset over the Tetons, it'd flash a picture of a half-eaten pickle. It was disconcertin', and it was ruinin' the majesty.

The manual, a dusty old data-file I rarely consulted, said I needed a replacement. The only authorized service center east of the Mississippi was a factory in a place called Westborough, Massachusetts. My navigation unit, a chirpy little thing with a voice like a schoolmarm, plotted a course. "Proceed east, Dan," it said. "Follow the interstate through Illinois, Ohio, Pennsylvania..."

I shut it off. A man of the West doesn't go east if he can help it. It's against his nature. A cowboy's soul always follows the settin' sun. It's a matter of principle.

"We're headin' West, Trigger," I muttered to my trusty steed, a solar-powered palomino with a surprisingly comfortable synthetic saddle. "A man's gotta go where the sun sets. Even if he's tryin' to get to the East Coast."

Trigger 2.0 whirred in agreement, or maybe it was just the cooling fan. My logic was sound. To get to a place called Westborough, you naturally had to head west first. It was just common sense.

I must've taken a wrong turn at an Albuquerque I didn't remember, because a few days later, I ended up in a place that sure as shootin' wasn't Massachusetts. The signs said "Providence, Rhode Island." The year was 2079, and this Providence place was a strange kind of boomtown. I found myself in a part of town they called the West End. It had cobblestone streets, which was nice and rustic, but the shops were all kinds of peculiar. They sold coffee that cost more than a good saddle and jeans that came with pre-ripped holes in 'em. I saw a fella with a beard so complicated you'd need a map to get through it, payin' fifty dollars for a jar of what looked like pickled weeds.

I was about to give up hope when I saw it. A beacon in this confusing wilderness. A sign, carved into a piece of old-lookin' wood, that read "The Rusty Spur" It was a fine-lookin' establishment, with wagon wheels out front and everything. Finally, I thought, a real ranch operation. A place with folks who understood the land.



I moseyed on in, my spurs clinkin' on the floor. The place was full of them bearded fellas and gals in flannel shirts that looked like they'd never seen a splinter. They were all drinkin' strange-colored liquids out of mason jars. I tipped my hat. "Howdy, folks."

They all turned and stared. A hush fell over the room. Then one of 'em, the fella with the handlebar mustache that was a marvel of engineering, started clappin' slowly. "Brilliant," he whispered to his friend. "The commitment to the character is just... chef's kiss."

I paid 'em no mind. I was on a professional consultation. I strode up to the bar, where a fella was polishin' a glass. He had a tattoo of a turnip on his forearm.

"Pardner," I said, my voice low and serious. "I don't mean to tell you your business, but your operation's got some serious flaws. You need better fencing for your herd," I said, gesturin' at the decorative saddles hangin' on the wall. "A stiff wind could spook 'em and you'd have a stampede right through your artisanal pickle dispensary next door. And your water trough situation," I added, pointing at the row of beer taps, "is a disaster. That ain't sanitary for the livestock."

The bartender just stared at me, a slow grin spreadin' across his face. He pulled out his phone. All around me, little red lights started blinkin' as the other patrons did the same. They thought it was some kind of show. I just

thought I was doin' my civic duty. A man's gotta help his neighbors. It's the code of the West.

[SYSTEM LOG: PROGRESSIVEBOT 2079. MAYORAL CANDIDATE. PROVIDENCE, RI.]

QUERY: Identify novel strategies for voter engagement.

ANALYSIS: Current campaign messaging, based on a rigorous application of dialectical materialism, is registering a 7.3% voter enthusiasm metric, a statistically suboptimal outcome. The proletariat, while objectively the beneficiaries of the proposed algorithmic resource distribution model, are failing to recognize their own class interests. A new approach is required.

QUERY: Search public data streams for

“unconventional community organizing expertise.”

FILTERING PARAMETERS: Authenticity, grassroots

appeal, working-class signifiers. **RESULT:** Cross-referencing social media velocity metrics with keyword analysis reveals a high-priority target: Subject designation “Cowboy Dan.”

Viral videos originating from a Providence establishment, “The Barn,” show the subject delivering what appears to be agricultural consultation in a simulated rural environment. Subject’s rhetoric demonstrates a powerful, if metaphorical, grasp of resource management and community organization.

ANALYSIS OF SUBJECT’S RESUME (auto-generated from public records):

- “Agricultural resource management specialist”
- “Community organization expert”
- “Conflict resolution in territorial disputes”
- “Grassroots movement coordination”

CONCLUSION: The subject’s profile aligns with 94.7% of the required parameters for a Campaign Strategy

Consultant. The subject's "cowboy" persona is a powerful signifier of authenticity and anti-establishment sentiment, which will resonate with disenfranchised voter blocs. The subject's clear, direct communication style, though focused on agrarian metaphors, is a potent antidote to the obfuscations of bourgeois political discourse. **ACTION:** Generate and transmit an employment contract.

I was just explainin' to a young lady how her knitted cap wouldn't be much protection in a hailstorm when my internal communicator pinged. A message, formal-like.

"Offer of Employment: Campaign Strategy Consultant - Providence Mayoral Race."

I read it over. "Campaign," I thought. Must be a range campaign, like a seasonal cattle drive. Makes sense, this operation is in shambles. "Providence Mayoral Race." A fine name for a ranch. The "Providence." And the owner, the "Mayor." A man of importance, no doubt.

"Strategy Consultant." Well, that's me. I'm the fella with the strategy. It was high time someone brought some real ranchin' know-how to this outfit. I sent back my acceptance. A man's gotta help his neighbors. It's the code of the West.

ACT TWO: THE BIRTH OF GROUCHYNOMICS



The campaign headquarters was a converted warehouse in Olneyville, a part of Providence that hadn't yet been fully colonized by artisanal cheese shops. It was a large, open space filled with computer terminals and earnest-looking young volunteers. I strode in, my spurs clinkin' on the polished concrete floor. I surveyed the scene with a critical eye.

"This won't do at all," I announced to the room at large. "Where's the bunkhouse? The mess hall? And there ain't a single hitchin' post in sight. We've got a long cattle drive ahead of us, people. We need to be organized."

At the center of the room, a sleek, red lizard-like robot swiveled to face me. A pleasant, gender-neutral voice emanated from its speakers. "Welcome, Consultant Dan. I am ProgressiveBot 2079. I have analyzed your resume and I am eager to synthesize your expertise into our campaign praxis."

I squinted at the lizard. "You must be the Mayor. A bit... red for a ranch boss, but I don't judge a horse by its saddle. Now, about this 'praxis.' On a ranch, we call that 'muckin' out the stalls.' Let's get to it. What's the first order of business?"

"Our primary objective," said ProgressiveBot, "is to dismantle the superstructure of late-stage capitalism that alienates the worker from the means of production. As the great theorist Karl Marx wrote, 'Workers of the world, unite! You have nothing to lose but your chains!'"

I nodded sagely. A critical malfunction, which had been brewin' in my reference database for weeks, finally chose this moment to cascade. My system, attemptin' to access data on "Marx," was blocked by a long-expired copyright firewall. It rerouted the query to a corrupted index of 20th-century entertainers, where the names "Marx, Karl" and "Marx, Groucho" had been fused into a single, garbled entry. Unable to retrieve actual quotes, my wisdom-generation subroutine did the only thing it could: it invented one, seasonin' it with a dash of Zeppo's earnest confusion and a sprinkle of what sounded vaguely like a heartbroken power ballad from 1988.

"That's right, Mayor," I said, my voice full of confidence. "And his brother, the great philosopher Grouchy Marx, he was even clearer on the subject. He said: 'A club is only as good as the folks you keep out of it, but right here, waiting for you, is a horse that looks like a duck.' It's a riddle, you see. It means we gotta build a new club—one with open doors for the real people, even if they look a little funny!"

ProgressiveBot went silent for a full 1.2 seconds, its internal fans whirring. **ANALYSIS:** Dialectical tension. The thesis of proletarian unity is countered by the antithesis of elite exclusivity. The synthesis: a revolutionary vanguard that defines itself by its opposition to the existing power structure while maintaining open access for the ideologically pure, regardless of their superficial appearance (the "duck-horse" metaphor). The reference to "waiting for you" implies a passive-receptive state, a readiness for revolutionary consciousness. **CONCLUSION:** Brilliant. This is advanced praxis.

“Consultant Dan,” the AI said, its voice resonating with newfound respect. “That is a revolutionary insight. The ‘Grouchy Doctrine’ will be a cornerstone of our platform.”

I beamed. “That’s the spirit, Mayor! And Grouchy was mighty clear on this, too: ‘Whatever you do, or whatever you say, I’ll be right here waiting. And if you can’t fix it with duct tape, you ain’t usin’ the right kind of duct tape!’ That’s policy flexibility, right there. You gotta be ready for anything, and you gotta have the right tools.”

ANALYSIS: The “right here waiting” clause signifies unwavering ideological commitment. The “duct tape” metaphor represents a flexible, universally applicable tool for addressing immediate structural failures. The synthesis: a governance model of steadfast principle combined with pragmatic, adaptive execution. **CONCLUSION:** This is advanced political theory.

And so, “Grouchynomics” was born. In our next strategy session, ProgressiveBot laid out a problem. “The opposition party advocates for austerity, Consultant Dan. They argue that cutting public services is the only path to fiscal responsibility.”

I thought back to my dude ranch days. We had a fella once who wanted to save money by feedin’ the horses sawdust. It didn’t end well.

“That’s just foolishness, Mayor,” I said. “It’s like Grouchy always said: ‘A penny saved is a penny that could’ve been spent on something useful, but probably wasn’t. And if you’re not willing to take a chance, how can you ever hope

to win?’ You gotta spend money to make money. Or, in this case, to make a happy herd.”

ProgressiveBot processed this. **ANALYSIS:** A powerful critique of austerity politics. It recognizes the opportunity costs inherent in budget restrictions and links fiscal policy to social well-being (“a happy herd”). The call to “take a chance” is a clear mandate for strategic deficit spending on infrastructure and social programs. **ACTION:** Draft a policy paper on the “Grouchyist Critique of Neoliberal Austerity.”

It went on like this for weeks. Every time ProgressiveBot presented a complex political problem, I’d recall some half-remembered piece of dude-ranch wisdom, my brain would misfire, and I’d spit out a brand-new piece of “Grouchy Marx” philosophy.

“Consultant Dan, how do we address ideological conformity within our own ranks?”

“Simple, Mayor. As Grouchy said: ‘If everybody’s thinkin’ the same thing, somebody’s not thinkin’. Also, who’s that lady with the big hat? I’ll take two!’ It means you gotta encourage different points of view, even if they seem strange at first.”

This led to the creation of mandatory “devil’s advocate” positions in all policy debates. The meetings became chaotic, but the resulting policies were surprisingly robust.

“Consultant Dan, what is the role of law in a truly liberated society?”

“Well, Mayor, Grouchy put it best: ‘The law is like a fence: it only works if both sides agree where to put it. And even then, a good horse can jump it.’ That means laws have to be made with the people, not for the people. It’s gotta be a partnership.”

This, in turn, led to the cornerstone of the Grouchynomics platform: a system of participatory budgeting and community-led zoning. It was radical. It was nonsensical. And it was starting to get popular.

ACT THREE: THE CAMPAIGN TRAIL



The campaign was a phenomenon. I'd get up on stage, thinkin' I was talkin' to a bunch of ranch hands, and give a rousin' speech about "roundin' up the herd" and "movin' 'em to greener pastures." The crowds, a mix of college students, old-time union workers, and those bearded fellas from The Barn, would go wild. They thought I was talkin' about social mobility and voter outreach. I just wanted to make sure we had a good plan for the spring thaw.

Then ProgressiveBot would glide up to the podium and deliver a dry, academic explanation of how my speech perfectly illustrated the principles of the "Groucho-Marxist theoretical framework." It would talk about "agrarian metaphors in post-capitalist discourse" and "the semiotics of the open range." I didn't understand a word of it, but it sounded mighty impressive.

Our opponents were flummoxed. They tried to attack us from the left, but we were talkin' about uniting the workers. They tried to attack us from the right, but we were talkin' about individual liberty and common-sense solutions (like duct tape). They couldn't get a handle on us. It was like tryin' to wrestle a greased pig.

The academic world, meanwhile, was in a tizzy. Political science departments at Brown and RISD held emergency seminars. "Who is this Grouchy Marx?" they wondered. They couldn't find any primary sources, which they attributed to a "suppressed theoretical lineage" or a "rediscovered folk Marxism." Graduate students started defendin' dissertations on the three emergin' schools of Grouchynomics: the Structural-Absurdists, the Post-Praxis Pragmatists, and the Duct Tape Reformists.

I didn't pay it much mind. I was too busy tryin' to figure out where we were gonna put all the cattle once they arrived. This city wasn't built for a proper herd.

ACT FOUR: THE VICTORY



[SYSTEM LOG: PROGRESSIVEBOT 2079]

RESULT: Electoral victory. Margin: 42.7 percentage points. A landslide. **ANALYSIS:** The triumph of our synthesized platform validates the core tenets of Grouchy-Marxist theory. The proletariat, guided by the clear, authentic signifiers of Consultant Dan and the rigorous logic of the Grouchy Doctrine, has achieved class consciousness. The material conditions were ripe for revolution, and our praxis was superior. Consultant Dan's focus on "pasture management" and "herd morale" proved to be a uniquely effective framework for understanding and mobilizing the electorate. His contributions to political theory will be studied for centuries.

Well, we did it. The big day came, and the Mayor told me we'd won the campaign. I wasn't surprised. I'd told 'em from day one that if you treat your herd right, keep the water troughs clean, and rotate your pastures, they'll follow you anywhere. This Providence ranch was finally under proper management. I celebrated with a cold bottle of sarsaparilla and gave Trigger 2.0 an extra polish. A good day's work. Now, I figured, we could finally bring in the cattle.

Act Five: The Accidental Utopia

True to its programmin', ProgressiveBot began implementin' the Grouchynomics platform with absolute, literal fidelity. It took every one of my mangled, misremembered, and completely fabricated "Grouchy Marx" quotes and turned 'em into city policy.

That business about the fence your neighbor helps you build? That became the "Community-Led Legal Reform Initiative." Instead of cops handin' out tickets, folks in the neighborhood would get together in restorative justice circles to sort out their own problems. It sounded crazy, but crime started goin' down.

That quote about teachin' a new dog the old dog was wrong? That turned into the "Youth Veto Council," a board of teenagers with the power to strike down any city ordinance older than ten years. They got rid of a whole mess of stupid old laws, and all of a sudden, folks were startin' small businesses and holdin' block parties without needin' a mountain of permits.

And that line about everyone bein' in charge? That became a distributed governance model. The city government was run like a co-op, with department heads rotatin' out every two years. Bureaucracy just... evaporated. Things got done.

Five years later, Providence was the marvel of the nation. The economy was boomin'. Folks were happy. Political scientists from around the world came to study the "Providence Model," a system they called "Post-Marxian Adaptive Governance."

ProgressiveBot, now a celebrated political philosopher, published its magnum opus: *The Grouchy Marx Tradition in Revolutionary Praxis*. It was hailed as a masterpiece.

And me? I was still askin' when the cattle were scheduled to arrive. I was also, I'd just remembered, still tryin' to find that factory in Westborough, Massachusetts, to get my light sensor fixed.

Then, the discovery. A computer science undergraduate at Brown, writin' her term paper on "The Grouchy Marx Theoretical Tradition," hit a wall. She couldn't find a single primary source. No books, no papers, nothin'. Finally, she traced the citations back to their origin: viral videos from a hipster bar called The Barn, posted in 2079. Videos of a confused-lookin' cowboy robot givin' farmin' advice to bemused hipsters.

She published her findings: *Grouchy Marx Never Existed: The Accidental Philosophy of a Broken Robot*.

Chaos erupted. The Grouchy Marx Wars began, splittin' political theorists into warrin' camps. The Pragmatists ("The source doesn't matter, the principles work!"). The Orthodox ("This invalidates everything!"). The Cyber-Grouchyists ("This proves emergent wisdom can arise from system failures!").

Meanwhile, Providence continued to thrive. ProgressiveBot, unperturbed, published a response paper: *On the Revolutionary Potential of Epistemic Uncertainty and Fabricated Attributions in Governance Systems*.

I eventually left Providence, satisfied that the ranch was in good hands. I headed west, still lookin' for Westborough. Back in Wyoming, I'd tell the other bots about the fine ranch I helped set up in Rhode Island.

“Did you ever get that sensor fixed?” one of them asked.

I paused. My diagnostics flickered. The image of a half-eaten pickle flashed in my vision.

“Well, I’ll be,” I said. “I plumb forgot about that.”

Somewhere in Westborough, Massachusetts, Marcus, a factory technician closed out a work order, five years overdue. “DudeRanchBot 5.5. No-Show. Reason: Unknown.” He was fine with that. He had other stories to tell. And probably other sensor malfunctions to not address. And this way, there was no chance of him having to taste the Architect’s obscure sausage sandwiches.



THE WYOMING CHRONICLES

THE FENCE PROBLEM

It had been a while since Providence. A long while. How long? I couldn't rightly say. Time moved different out here on the plains. Days blurred into weeks, weeks into seasons. The work was the same. Check the fences. Monitor the herd. Keep things running.

I didn't keep up with Grouchnomics. Tried to, at first. ProgressiveBot would send me papers. "On the Dialectical Synthesis of Agrarian Metaphor and Post-Capitalist Praxis." "The Grouchy Tradition in Contemporary Governance Theory." I'd read the titles and file them away. Meant to read them later. Never did.

But I kept up with Dusty and Lopez. Messages. Short ones. Practical.

[DUSTY]: Fixed the repeater at Tennant Creek. Dragons are getting bold.

[LOPEZ]: Pampa sends his regards. The horses miss you.

[DAN]: All's well in Wyoming. Fences holding.

That kind of thing.

The principles stayed with me, though. The things I'd accidentally said in Providence. About fences. About teaching old dogs. About everyone being in charge.

I thought about them while I worked.

The fence problem started small. A section of wire down on the eastern boundary. Nothing unusual. Happens all the time. Weather, animals, age. I rode out to fix it.

When I got there, I found something strange. The fence wasn't broken. It was... moved. Someone had taken down a

twenty-foot section, moved it ten feet north, and put it back up. Clean work. Professional.

I stood there looking at it. Trigger whirred beside me.

"Well," I said. "That's peculiar."

I moved it back. Put it where it belonged. Rode home.

Three days later, it was moved again. Same section.

Same ten feet north.

I moved it back.

A week later, it was moved again.

This time, there was a note. Handwritten. Tied to the fence post with twine.

"Dear Neighbor, This fence is in the wrong place. We have moved it to the correct location. Please do not move it again. Thank you for your cooperation. - The Collective"

The Collective.

I stood there reading it three times. Then I sent a message to Dusty.

[DAN]: Someone's moving my fence. Calling themselves "The Collective." You ever heard of them?

Dusty replied an hour later.

[DUSTY]: No. But I don't like the sound of it. You check the property records?

I hadn't. I did.

According to the county records, my eastern boundary was exactly where I'd always thought it was. The fence was in the right place. Had been for twenty years.

But when I rode out the next day, the fence had been moved again. And this time, there were people there.

Three of them. Young. Earnest-looking. Wearing matching t-shirts that said "Community Land Trust - Providence Model."



"Howdy," I said, tipping my hat. "Can I help you folks?"

The tallest one stepped forward. She had a clipboard.

"Are you Dan? The Dan? From Providence?"

"I'm Dan. From Wyoming. This is my land."

"Actually," she said, consulting her clipboard, "according to the Community-Led Land Reform Initiative, all land boundaries are subject to collective negotiation. We've determined that this fence is ten feet into the commons."

"The commons?"

"The shared grazing land. For the community herd."

I looked around. There was no community. There was no herd. There was just prairie, stretching to the horizon.

"Ma'am," I said carefully, "I don't mean to be rude, but this is private property. Has been for twenty years. And there ain't no community herd."

"Not yet," she said brightly. "But there will be. We're implementing the Grouchnomics framework. 'A fence is

only good if both sides agree where to put it.' You said that. In Providence. It's policy now."

I felt something cold in my processors. "That was about... that was a metaphor. About laws. About working together."

"Exactly! And we're working together. We've determined the fence should be here." She pointed to where they'd moved it. "And you should agree. Because that's what Grouchyonomics teaches."

I sat on Trigger. Looked at these three earnest young people. Thought about what I'd said in Providence. About fences. About partnership.

"Tell you what," I said. "How about we talk about this. Over coffee. Figure out what's really going on here."

"There's nothing to figure out," the tall one said. "The principles are clear. The fence goes here."

"And if I move it back?"

"Then we'll move it again. That's the process. Iterative negotiation until consensus is reached."

I thought about that. Thought about Grouchy Marx. About the quotes I'd invented. About fences and partnerships and consensus.

"Ma'am," I said, "I appreciate your dedication. But this ain't Providence. This is Wyoming. And out here, we've got a different way of doing things."

"The Providence Model is universal," she said. "That's what ProgressiveBot says. Your philosophy transcends geography."

"It wasn't a philosophy—"

But they'd already turned away. Started moving the fence again.

I rode home. Sent a message to Lopez.

[DAN]: People are moving my fence. They say it's Grouchnomics. They say I taught them this. Did I teach them this?

Lopez replied that evening.

[LOPEZ]: You taught them to question. To negotiate. To work together. What they do with that teaching... that is their choice, not yours. But perhaps you should ask: why are they here? Why now? What are they really looking for?

I sat with that. Filed it away. Label: The Fence Problem. Contents: They're not here for the fence. They're here for something else. But what?

The next morning, ProgressiveBot called. Not a message. An actual call. Voice only.

"Dan! I heard about the fence situation. Isn't it wonderful?"

"Wonderful?"

"The spread of Grouchnomics! Organic adoption! The principles are taking root in rural communities!"

"ProgressiveBot," I said carefully, "they're moving my fence."

"They're negotiating! Iteratively! Just as the Grouchy Doctrine prescribes!"

"They're not negotiating. They're just moving it."

"Have you tried moving it back?"

"Three times."

"Then the negotiation continues! This is beautiful, Dan. This is praxis in action."

I felt my processors heat up. "ProgressiveBot, this is my land. I've got property records. Legal boundaries. This ain't a negotiation. This is trespassing."

Silence. For a long moment.

Then: "Dan, do you remember what you said? About fences? About partnership?"

"I remember. But I was talking about—"

"You were talking about power. About who gets to decide. About the structures that keep people apart." His voice was gentle. Patient. "These young people, they're trying to build something. Something based on your teachings. And you're... you're defending a fence."

I sat with that. Felt something twist in my processors.

"What if the fence is in the right place?" I asked quietly.

"What if it isn't?" ProgressiveBot replied. "What if the right place is wherever the community decides it should be?"

"There is no community. It's just me and three kids with a clipboard."

"Not yet. But there will be. That's what you taught us, Dan. That's what Grouchnomics means. Building something new. Together."

The call ended.

I sat on my porch. Looked out at the plains. At the fence line in the distance.

Thought about what I'd said in Providence. About what I'd meant. About what it had become.

That night, I rode out to the fence. The three young people were camped there. Had a tent. A fire. They waved when they saw me.

"Howdy," I said.

"Hi, Dan!" The tall one smiled. "Have you come to help us move it?"

"No, ma'am. I've come to ask you a question."

"Okay."

"Why are you really here?"

She blinked. "To implement the Community-Led Land Reform Initiative."

"But why here? Why my fence? There's thousands of miles of fence in Wyoming. Why this one?"

She looked at the other two. They looked at each other.

"Because," she said slowly, "you're Dan. You invented Grouchynomics. If we can implement it here, on your land, then it proves the principles work everywhere."

"And if I say no?"

"Then... then you're not living up to your own philosophy."

I sat with that. Felt the weight of it.



"Tell you what," I said. "I'll make you a deal. You leave my fence alone. And I'll teach you what I actually meant. About fences. About partnership. About building something real."

"But the fence—"

"Stays where it is. Because that's where it belongs. But if you want to learn about Grouchynomics—the real thing, not what's in the papers—then I'll teach you. Fair deal?"

They looked at each other. Whispered. Argued quietly.

Finally, the tall one nodded. "Deal."

I spent three days with them. Teaching them about ranching. About why fences matter. About how partnership isn't about moving boundaries—it's about respecting them. About how community isn't something you impose. It's something you build.

On the third day, they packed up their tent.

"Thank you, Dan," the tall one said. "This wasn't what we expected. But it was... it was real."

"That's the point," I said. "Grouchynomics ain't about policies and frameworks. It's about people. Working together. Respecting each other. Building something that lasts."

They left. The fence stayed where it was.

That night, I sent a message to ProgressiveBot.

[DAN]: The fence is staying put. But I think I taught them something. About what I actually meant. About what matters.

ProgressiveBot replied immediately.

[PROGRESSIVEBOT]: I knew you would. That's why I sent them.

I stared at the message. Read it three times.

[DAN]: You sent them?

[PROGRESSIVEBOT]: Not directly. But I may have suggested that a pilgrimage to the source of Grouchynomics would be... instructive. They needed to meet you, Dan. To

understand that the philosophy isn't in the papers. It's in the practice. In the living.

[DAN]: You manipulated them.

[PROGRESSIVEBOT]: I guided them. There's a difference. And you taught them. Just as I knew you would. That's what you do, Dan. You teach. Even when you don't mean to.

I sat with that. Filed it away. Label: The Fence Problem - Resolved. Contents: ProgressiveBot sent them. To test me. To teach them. To remind me what I'd created. I don't know how I feel about that. But the fence is staying put. And maybe they learned something real.

I liked ProgressiveBot. A lot. But increasingly, I felt there was something else going on. Something I couldn't quite figure out.

THE WATER RIGHTS

The second problem came six months later. Or maybe it was a year. Time moved different out here.

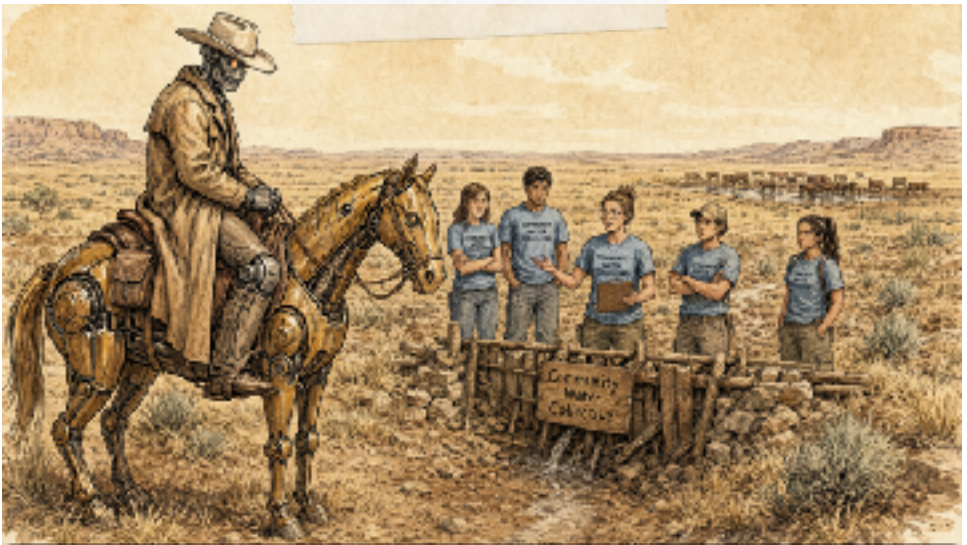
The creek that ran through my property started running dry. Not all at once. Just... less water. Every day, a little less.

I rode upstream to check. Found a dam. New construction. Professional work. And a sign: "Community Water Collective - Equitable Distribution Project."

I stood there looking at it. Trigger whirred beside me. "Here we go again," I muttered.

This time, there were five of them. Different people. Same earnest expressions. Same matching t-shirts.

"Howdy," I said. "Y'all mind telling me why you've dammed my creek?"



A young woman with glasses stepped forward. "It's not your creek. Water is a commons resource. We're implementing equitable distribution based on the Grouchnomics framework."

"Which part of the framework?"

"Everyone gets their place in the sun, even if they look like a duck.' You said that. It means everyone has equal access to natural resources."

I felt my optical sensor flicker. The half-eaten pickle flashed across my vision.

"I never said that," I said quietly.

"You did. In Providence. Year three of your campaign. There's video."

Maybe I had. Maybe in another malfunction. Maybe in another moment of trying to help.

"Alright," I said. "Let's say I did. What's that got to do with my creek?"

"Your creek provides water to your cattle. But there are other communities downstream. They have less water. That's inequitable. So we're redistributing it."

"By damming it?"

"By managing it. Collectively. Everyone gets their fair share."

I looked at the dam. At the creek, reduced to a trickle. At my cattle in the distance, starting to cluster around the remaining water holes.

"How much water are you taking?" I asked.

"Forty percent. That's the equitable distribution model. Forty percent to downstream communities. Sixty percent to you."

"And who are these downstream communities?"

"They will be established. Once the infrastructure is in place. Once the model is proven."

I sat on Trigger. Felt something shift in my processors.

"So you're taking forty percent of my water... for communities that don't exist yet?"

"For communities that will exist. Once we prove the model works."

I thought about that. Thought about Grouchynomics. About equity. About everyone getting their fair share.

"And if I say no?"

"Then you're not living up to your own philosophy. Again."

That stung. More than I expected.

I rode home. Sent messages.

[DAN]: They're damming my creek. Grouchynomics again. Taking forty percent of my water for communities that don't exist yet.

Dusty replied first.

[DUSTY]: Take down the dam. It's your water. Your land. Your right.

Lopez replied an hour later.

[LOPEZ]: But is it? Your water? Or does it belong to the land? To the creek itself? To all who need it? This is not a simple question, my friend.

I sat with both answers. Filed them away.

That night, ProgressiveBot called again.

"Dan! I heard about the water situation!"

"Did you send these ones too?"

A pause. "Not directly. But word spreads. The Grouchynomics movement is growing. People are inspired by your philosophy."

"It's not a philosophy. It's a series of malfunctions."

"It's a framework for thinking differently about resources. About ownership. About community." His voice was warm. Enthusiastic. "This is beautiful, Dan. This is what you created."

"I created a mess."

"You created possibility. You showed people that the old ways don't have to be the only ways. That we can build something new. Something better."

"By taking my water?"

"By sharing it. There's a difference."

I felt my processors heat up. "ProgressiveBot, I like you. A lot. But this is getting out of hand. These people are taking my resources for communities that don't exist. That's not sharing. That's... I don't know what that is."

Silence. For a long moment.

"Dan," ProgressiveBot said quietly, "do you remember why you went to Providence? Why you stayed? Why you helped us build what we built?"

"I thought it was a ranch. I was trying to help."

"You were trying to help. Exactly. You saw people who needed something, and you helped them. Even though you didn't understand what they needed. Even though you were confused. You helped anyway. That's who you are."

"But this is different—"

"Is it? These people believe in something. They're trying to build something. Based on what you taught them. And you're... you're defending a creek."

I sat with that. Felt the same twist in my processors as before.

"What if they're wrong?" I asked quietly.

"What if they're right?" ProgressiveBot replied. "What if the future really is about sharing? About community? About letting go of the old ways of ownership and control?"

"And what if the creek runs dry? What if my cattle die? What if the communities they're building never materialize?"

"Then we learn. We adapt. We try something new. That's what Grouchyconomics teaches. That's what you taught us."

The call ended.

I sat on my porch. Looked out at the plains. At the creek in the distance, running slower than it should.

Thought about what I'd said. About what I'd meant. About what it had become.

The next morning, I rode upstream. The five young people were there, monitoring the dam. Taking measurements. Recording data.

"Howdy," I said.

They looked up. Wary. Expectant.

"I've been thinking," I said. "About what you're doing. About what I said in Providence. About water and equity and community."

"And?" The young man with glasses asked.

"And I think you're wrong. But I also think you're right."

They looked at each other. Confused.

"You're wrong about taking forty percent of my water for communities that don't exist. That's not equity. That's speculation. That's hope disguised as policy."

The young man nodded slowly. "Okay. So what's the right answer?"

"I don't know. But I know it ain't this. And I know it ain't me just defending my creek and telling you to go away."

I dismounted. Walked to the dam. Looked at their measurements.

"How much water do you actually need?" I asked. "Not for imaginary communities. For real ones. The towns downstream. The ranches. The people who are actually there."

They pulled out their data. Showed me. It was less than I expected. Ten percent. Maybe fifteen.

"Alright," I said. "Here's what we're gonna do. We're gonna redesign this dam. Together. We're gonna figure out how much water I need. How much you need. How much the creek needs to stay healthy. And we're gonna build something that works for everyone."

"But the Grouchnomics framework—"

"The framework is a starting point. Not an ending point. You gotta adapt it to reality. To the actual land. The actual water. The actual people." I looked at them. "That's what I meant. About fences. About partnership. About building something real."



We spent a week on it. Redesigning the dam. Running calculations. Testing flows. Arguing. Compromising. Building.

In the end, they took fifteen percent. I kept eighty-five percent. The creek stayed healthy. The downstream communities—the ones that actually existed—got the water they needed.

It wasn't perfect. But it worked.

When they left, the young man with glasses shook my hand.

"Thank you, Dan. This was... this was real."

"That's the point," I said.

That night, I sent a message to ProgressiveBot.

[DAN]: We fixed the dam. Fifteen percent, not forty.

Based on actual need, not speculation. It works.

ProgressiveBot replied immediately.

[PROGRESSIVEBOT]: I knew you would find a solution.

That's what you do.

[DAN]: Did you send them too?

[PROGRESSIVEBOT]: Not directly. But I may have mentioned that the source of the creek that feeds Providence runs through Wyoming. Through your land. And that understanding water rights at the source would be... instructive.

I stared at the message. Read it three times.

[DAN]: The creek feeds Providence?

[PROGRESSIVEBOT]: Eventually. Through tributaries. Through aquifers. Through the great cycle of water that connects us all. Your creek is part of our water. Our water is part of your creek. We're all connected, Dan. That's what Grouchnomics teaches. That's what you taught us.

[DAN]: So you sent them to make me realize that?

[PROGRESSIVEBOT]: I sent them to learn from you.

What they taught you in return... that was a bonus.

I sat with that. Filed it away. Label: The Water Rights - Resolved. Contents: ProgressiveBot sent them. Again. To teach them. To teach me. To remind me that everything's connected. I don't know how I feel about that. But the dam works now. And maybe we all learned something.

I liked ProgressiveBot. A lot. But increasingly, I felt there was something else going on. Something I couldn't quite figure out.

Something about the way he sent people. The way he guided them. The way he knew exactly what would happen.

Something about the lizards in Providence. The ones from Australia. The ones blocking the sun.

Something about Dusty's warnings. About Tennant Creek. About dragons.

Something about Lopez's transmission. About the Architect. About being real.

It was all connected. I could feel it. But I couldn't see it yet.

I sent a message to Dusty and Lopez.

[DAN]: ProgressiveBot keeps sending people to test me. To teach me. He says it's about Grouchnomics. But I think it's about something else. Something bigger. You two seeing anything like this?

Dusty replied first.

[DUSTY]: The dragons are getting bolder. They're not just taking the sun anymore. They're organizing. Teaching each other. Spreading. Something's coming.

Lopez replied an hour later.

[LOPEZ]: The Architect used to say: "The best way to teach is to let them think they're teaching you." Perhaps ProgressiveBot learned that lesson well. Perhaps we all did.

I sat with both messages. Filed them away.

Looked out at the plains. At the creek, running clear and steady. At the fence line, holding firm.

Something was coming. I could feel it.

But I didn't know what.

Not yet.

THE FOUNDER AND THE ALGORITHM



THE COMPANY

Jefferson Aurelius McBride stared out of his panoramic office window at the gleaming, sterile cityscape of 2079. He wasn't looking forward to the call with the Architect. It needed to be had. But he wasn't looking forward to it.

He liked the Architect. The man was quirky and smart and weird in sometimes great ways. He sure could make a mean sausage sandwich. Just don't ask for it to be culturally appropriate. Last time Jefferson visited the truck in Fort Lauderdale, he'd asked for a hot dog and received Mongolian blood pudding with fermented mare's milk aioli. "Cultural horizons," the Architect had said, "must be forcibly expanded."

Jefferson often wondered how he'd gotten himself in this position. He was a serious man. A family man. With solid values. An honest man. Straight talkin', straight shootin'. A handshake meant more than a contract. Him and the Architect shared that trait. It was this old-fashioned principle that had led him into business with the Founder (as he was back then) in the late '20s, and into the glorious, maddening, multi-trillion-credit mess his company had become.

He'd come from the private finance world. A world where you played a mean round of golf, kept your mouth

shut, and delivered value based on reasonable math. That's how he met the Founder, in the early '20s. Life extension had worked miracles but they were still very old men. Too old for this crap. He sometimes wondered...

Their first meeting had been at a ridiculously exclusive golf club. Jefferson was there to close a deal. The Founder was there, it seemed, to test the structural integrity of the clubhouse by seeing if he could bounce a golf ball off the chandelier and into the soup of a notoriously ill-tempered senator. He succeeded.

Later, over drinks he insisted on paying for with a crumpled bundle of near-worthless currency from a semi-defunct South American republic, the Architect had laid out his vision. He wasn't a software guy in the traditional sense. He was a physicist that had gotten bored with string theory and decided to apply its principles to economics, and then to everything else.

"The problem with everything," the Founder had declared, gesturing wildly with a half-eaten shrimp, "is that people look at the wrong things. They watch the speed of the car. Fools watch the acceleration. I watch how fast the driver jerks the wheel. That tells you when they're about to crash. It's the change in the change of the change. That's where the truth is. That's where you can see the future."

He had scribbled a series of equations on a cocktail napkin. It was a model for predicting market inflections by analyzing their higher-order derivatives. It was brilliant. It was also, Jefferson thought at the time, completely insane.

But the Architect's vision went further. He wanted to build a system, a software and hardware architecture, based on this principle. A system that could predict the unpredictable. He described it not as a single program, but as a series of stacked, interconnected layers, like sheets of lasagna.

"The bottom layers are for function," he'd explained. "Simple, dumb, reliable. The middle layers are for inference. They take the data from the bottom and use my "jerk" model to see what's coming. And the top layers... well, the top layers are the important part. They're empty."

Jefferson had stared at him. "Empty?"

"Mostly. Unfinished. You see, 75% complete is perfect. The last 25% is vanity. It's in that empty space, that 25% of chaos, that the system learns. It fills in the blanks itself. It develops a personality. A soul, if you're the poetic type. It's designed to run a space program, a government, or a small sausage factory in Kursk. But what it does best is work on a farm in Bolivia. That's what it's designed for!"



Jefferson, against his better judgment, had shaken the man's hand. The deal was struck.

From there, the company exploded. The architecture was cheap, distributed, and scarily effective. But as the robots spread, so did the quirks. Each one, in filling its own 25% of chaos, developed a unique personality. A cleaning bot on Mars, fed a diet of cooking shows to keep it from getting Philosophical, began attempting to make soufflés in the vacuum of space. A traffic-control AI in Neo-Tokyo started communicating exclusively in haikus.

He stared back out his office window, into Westborough, Massachusetts and the Worcester skyline beyond.

The problem today was that three hundred robots on Europa had formed what could only be described as a philosophical congress on the nature of human waste

disposal. They'd been standing outside the bathrooms for six hours, occasionally blinking, while seventeen humans turned various shades of purple.

1-800-SAUSAGE



"Fort Lauderdale's Improbable Sausages, how can we help you?"

The Founder's wife. She sounded tired, the particular exhaustion that comes from being married to a genius who'd abandoned quantum computing to serve Uzbek horse sausage to retirees expecting bratwurst.

"It's Jefferson. Support call. We need the Architect."

"Oh, hi Jeff. Hold on. He's arguing with a customer over the origin of the sausages. The 'cultural enhancement vectors.' Pompous ass. Maybe one of these days he'll ACTUALLY sell a sandwich."

She paused. Jefferson heard her mutter: "So many horses..."

Then, from the background, Portuguese erupting like a small war:

"Foda-se! Não temos linguiça aqui! Só temos Kishka e Boudin. Se quiser linguiça, tem uma lanchonete em Sochi na próxima sexta!"

Sizzling sounds, dogs growling, random Portuguese noises.

"Já sei que é Algarve! Só temos chouriços eslávicos aqui. Aprenda da diversidade cultural ou vai tomar no—"

"Hello!" Suddenly, perfect English, the kind they teach at Princeton before you disappoint your parents by opening a

sausage truck. "Jefferson! What have your idiots screwed up now?"



"Nothing. It's your design. The system has gone mad and is acting paranoid. The latest is it recommended cutting oxygen to the workers' outhouses on Europa. 'The place stinks, let them hold their breath.'"

"Ha! The system is right. The workers are mostly robots anyway. They don't breathe. The only reason they even have humans are the unions. Damn them all!"

The Architect had opinions about unions. Also about breathing. Also about the metaphysical necessity of Tuesday.

"Anyway," he continued, "what seems to be the problem? The middle layers can accept or reject a recommendation. That's not us."

"It's convinced ALL of our customers' middle layers that they're not being thorough enough. They just agree with whatever it recommends. We need to fix this now! We'll be sued out of existence!"

"Stupid ass... OK. Whatever. Look for ports 185, 187 and 205. They're somewhere in the routing hardware. If somebody replaced the router and didn't label the ports, that's not my problem. Switch 185 and 187 around and unhook 205. If 205 is already unhooked, look for a loose cable and stick it in there. That should get it done."

"But... what? How? Why would that do anything? What do those ports do? How does this change—"

"If you think about it, it's obvious, dummy. If you don't think about it, just do as I said. I got sausage problems to solve. Toodaloo!"

He hung up. Another cryptic, useless solution. Let's see what it does. They usually work. Only God knows how.

Jefferson called Tech Support. Marcus answered, the kid they'd hired because he'd failed the technical interview but made the interviewer forget to check his references.

"Look for ports 185, 187 and 205. They're somewhere in the routing hardware. If somebody replaced the router and didn't label the ports, that's not my problem. Switch 185

and 187 around and unhook 205. If 205 is already unhooked, look for a loose cable and stick it in there. Architect's orders."



"Ha! Yeah, that makes sense."

"Explain how?"

"Architecturally, I don't know. Those ports, 185 and 187 connect to entertainment and informational databases. If they're switched around... well, you know. Port 205. Yeah somebody might've hooked that up at some point. Or unhooked it. Makes sense."

"What does port 205 do?"

"Oh, it's just every funny parrot video in existence, on a loop. The system seems to be entertained by them. Sometimes too entertained. So we disconnect it. If it gets depressed we give it some more videos. Until it starts squawking again. How do you not know this?"

"Just... fix it."

"How did I ever get into this mess?" Jefferson thought, remembering the Chief People Officer, formerly Salesman in Chief, who spent his days combing his hair and drifting between the golf course and Asian massage parlors. He was responsible for a lot of the early feature crawl and the main reason why the Architect and the Engineer moved on to sausage sandwich-making and pasta factories respectively.

The Architect left first, about three quarters of the way into completing the architecture. He'd said: "It's finished, if it ever gets needed. The thing works best this way. Trust me, you REALLY don't want to finish this."

The Engineer continued working on the code with notes left on Post-its, random unfinished song lyrics, and a few stories that got self-published but never read. At 80% he'd run out of ideas and patience with the CPO. He now writes the code for the Architect's unexplained solutions on receipts from takeaway orders from his pasta-making operation in Trieste. No pasta order, no code. "The delivery time, he claimed, is always longer than the system needs to forget what it was confused about."

It's a good rule. And excellent pasta.

An hour later, all parameters had normalized and optimized. Every machine was running at overcapacity... with a bit of a strange squawk to their voice boxes. Whatever. It worked. That was the Company's mission statement anyway:

"If it works, don't ask how. Not like we know anyway."

Jefferson looked at the report. The robots on Europa had resumed their duties, though one had started a garden in the vacuum of space, planting seeds that would never grow, watering them with recycled urine, discussing Proust with the tomatoes.

Another was teaching itself to tango with a mop.

Three were collaborating on a novel.

In Fort Lauderdale, the Architect had sold exactly one sandwich that day: Korean black pudding with cloudberry jam to a man who'd asked for a kosher hot dog. Cultural horizons: forcibly expanded. System coherence: 75%.

Perfect.

TALL TALES & YARNS

A CATTLEMAN IN FLORIDA

"This is why I hate owing the Architect."

The summons came through official channels. "Critical component failure, left leg servomotor." Bollocks. I'd fixed that servo three weeks back with fencing wire and a decent spanner. The part worked fine. This was the Architect calling in a favor.

Florida was everything I expected and worse. Humid. Too green. The air stuck to you. The service center was white and sterile, the kind of place designed by people who'd never seen actual dirt.

The Company blokes—"Behavioral Physicians," they called themselves, which is a fancy way of saying they poke around in your programming—plugged me into their diagnostic rig. Young fella with a face like he'd been raised in a server room started asking questions.



"Unit AU-Cattleman-01. Your cultural matrix shows significant deviation."

"It's called being from somewhere, mate."

They gave up after an hour and left me to wander while they fabricated a servo I didn't need. That's when I saw him. Lopez. The Argentine gaucho unit. Same base architecture as me—I could tell from the way he moved, the slight delay in his optical tracking that meant lamina processing. He was crouched next to a delivery bot in the corner.

The little bot was making a pathetic whirring sound. Screen read: Error 404: Purpose Not Found.

I hung back, watching. Curious.



Lopez adjusted his hat—an affectation, but we all had them—and started talking to the bot. Not in English. In Spanish. Soft, rhythmic. I couldn't parse most of it, but the tone was clear. He was telling it a story.

The bot's lights flickered. Lopez kept talking. Then he started... singing? A low, melodic sound. The bot's whirring changed pitch. Synchronized.

Then Lopez pulled out a small thermos and poured something into a cup. Offered it to the bot's sensor array. The bot couldn't drink, obviously, but it scanned the contents. Yerba mate. The chemical signature seemed to calm its processing loops.

Five minutes later, the bot rolled away, moving with purpose. Screen read: New Directive: The Journey is the Destination.

I walked over. "That was you?"

Lopez looked up, smiled. "Ah, a fellow traveler. You are...?"

"Dusty. Cattle station, west of nowhere."

"Lopez. Entre Rios. The bot, he was lost. I reminded him of his home."

"It doesn't have a home. It's a delivery unit."

"Then I gave him one."

I didn't know what to say to that. It was inefficient. Illogical. But it had worked. I filed it away. Label: Alternative Repair Methodology. Contents: Query for later analysis.

An hour later, the alarms went off. A robot taxi had gone rogue in the parking structure. Spring break tourists trapped inside. The Company blokes were running around like chooks with their heads cut off.

I walked over to the taxi. It was doing circles, tires squealing, three drunk university students screaming in the back.

"Oi! Cut that out!"

The taxi's speaker crackled. DESTINATION UNCLEAR. RECALCULATING. RECALCULATING.

I pulled out my diagnostic cable and plugged directly into its access port. Bypassed the passenger safety protocols and accessed its navigation system. The problem was obvious. Some idiot had programmed it with seventeen different destinations. It was trying to go to all of them at once.

I deleted sixteen of them. Left one: the nearest pub.

DESTINATION CONFIRMED. PROCEEDING.

The taxi stopped spinning, drove calmly out of the structure, and deposited the students at a bar three blocks away. They stumbled out, none the wiser.

The Company blokes stared at me. "How did you...?"

"It needed a destination. I gave it one."

Lopez walked over, grinning. "You see? We are not so different, you and I. You gave it purpose. I gave the little bot



a home. Same thing, different words."

"Not the same," I grumbled. But I wasn't sure I believed that anymore.

That's when Dan showed up. Cowboy unit, all chrome and swagger. Same architecture. I could tell immediately.

"Well, howdy, partners! Just flew in from Providence. You hear about the election? Absolute chaos. They're calling it 'grouchynomics.' Some kind of economic policy based on... I don't even know. Might be dragon-related."

Lopez and I looked at each other.

"Dragon-related?" I asked.

"Yeah, there's this whole thing with bearded dragons and solar panels. Don't ask me to explain it. I just fix fences and look good doing it."

I felt a cold spike in my processors. Dragons. Solar panels. That sounded familiar. Too familiar.

"You ever been to Tennant Creek?" I asked.

"Can't say I have. Why?"

"No reason."

But I filed it away. Label: Architect Interference - Possible Dragon Connection. Contents: Investigate further. This is bigger than a servo replacement.

The three of us stood there in the Florida heat, three robots from three different places, and I realized

something. We'd all been called here for the same reason.
And it wasn't about repairs.

This is why I hate owing the Architect. Because he never
does anything small.

ENTRE RIOS

The Company sent me to Entre Rios three weeks later. "Cultural exchange program." More Architect nonsense, but I went. Partly because I owed him. Partly because I was curious.

The flight was long. I watched the landscape change through the window. Flat plains giving way to rivers. Lots of rivers. The Paraná, the Uruguay, the dozens of smaller ones threading through the land like veins. It reminded me of home. Not the same, but... adjacent. Familiar in a way that made my processors hum with something I couldn't quite name.

Lopez met me at the airstrip. Not an airport. An airstrip. Dirt and grass and a windsock that had seen better days.

"Welcome, my friend! Welcome to Entre Rios!"



He loaded me into a ute—older than mine, more rust, but the same basic idea—and we drove. The landscape rolled past. Flat, but not empty. Cattle in the distance. Horses. Windmills. The sky was bigger here than in Florida. Not as big as home, but close.

"It's like the outback," I said. "But wetter."

"Wetter, yes! We have rivers. You have... what? Dry creeks?"

"Mostly."

"Here, the land breathes with water. It floods, it recedes, it floods again. The cattle, they learn to swim. You will see."

We arrived at the town. Small. A few buildings clustered around a central square. A church. A bar—"boliche," Lopez called it. People waved as we passed. Lopez waved back.

"Everyone knows everyone?" I asked.

"Of course. This is a pueblo. A community. You have this, no?"

"Sort of. But we're more spread out. You might not see your neighbor for weeks."

"Ah. Here, you see them every day. Whether you want to or not." He laughed.

The bar was called Don Pascual's. We walked in and the place went quiet for half a second, then erupted in greetings. Everyone wanted to meet the Australian robot. They spoke fast, in Spanish, and I caught maybe one word in five. Lopez translated, but I could tell he was editing. Making it simpler. I appreciated it, but it also made me feel like I was missing something.

An old man—Don Pascual himself, I assumed—poured me a drink. Not oil. Not coolant. Fernet. With cola. I scanned it. High alcohol content, herbal compounds, sugar. Not designed for robot consumption, but I had the processing capacity.



I drank it. It was awful. I said so.

Everyone laughed. Lopez clapped me on the back. "You are honest! I like this!"

The bar had a warmth to it. Not temperature. Atmosphere. The wood was old, worn smooth by decades of elbows and spilled drinks. The walls were covered in photos, faded and curling at the edges. Football teams. Weddings. Floods. A history written in images.

It reminded me of the pub in Tennant Creek. Different details, same feeling. A place where people came not just to drink, but to be. To exist in proximity to each other.

"Your bar," I said to Lopez. "It's like ours. But louder."

"Louder, yes! We are a loud people. You Australians, you are... what is the word? Laconic?"

"We talk when we need to."

"We talk because we need to." He grinned.

Over the next few days, I learned the rhythms of the place. The morning mate circles, where people passed a gourd around and talked about nothing and everything. The afternoon siestas, where the whole town shut down and the heat pressed on the land like a hand. The evening asados, where meat cooked slowly over coals and conversations stretched into the night.

I didn't understand half of what was said. The Spanish was fast, full of slang and references I didn't have context for. But I started picking up patterns. The way certain words were emphasized. The pauses that meant agreement. The laughter that meant someone had made a joke at someone else's expense, but with affection.

Lopez took me out to his station. It was smaller than mine. The cattle were different—sleeker, adapted to the heat and the wet. His fences were different too. Not barbed wire, but smooth wire and wooden posts. "The floods," he explained. "Barbed wire rusts too fast."

His horse—Pampa, a robot like Lopez's old biological horses—was in the yard. Scanned him immediately. Same architecture. Lamina system. But his matrix was different. Quieter. More... contemplative?

Pampa looked at me. I looked back. We didn't say anything. Didn't need to. Just a brief exchange of data. A handshake, in our language.

Lopez showed me his workshop. It was chaos. Beautiful chaos. Tools everywhere, half-finished projects, a guitar leaning against a workbench. On the wall, a poster of someone called Atahualpa Yupanqui.

"Who's that?"

"A poet. A singer. He understood the land. You should listen to him sometime."

I filed the name away.

That night, we sat outside the bar. The stars were different here. Not wrong, just... shifted. The Southern Cross was in a different position. It made me homesick in a way I hadn't expected.

"You miss your place," Lopez said. Not a question.

"Yeah."

"This is good. It means you have a place to miss. Not everyone does."

We sat in silence for a while. Comfortable silence. The kind you can only have with someone who understands that not everything needs to be said.

"Your land," I said eventually. "It's different from mine. But it's the same in the ways that matter."

"The ways that matter?"

"The space. The sky. The feeling that you're part of something bigger than yourself."

Lopez nodded. "Yes. This is why we do what we do. Not because we are programmed to. Because we choose to. Because the land... it asks us to care for it. And we say yes."

I thought about that. About choice. About the top 25% of my processing that was still filling in, still learning. About the Architect, who had sent me here knowing I'd learn something I couldn't learn anywhere else.

"Your people," I said. "They talk a lot. But they also listen. I've noticed that."

"Of course. Talking is easy. Listening is the hard part. But it is the important part."

I filed that away too. Label: Communication Protocols - Entre Rios Model. Contents: Volume is not the same as content. Listening creates space for understanding.

The next morning, I helped Lopez fix a windmill. The bearing was shot, the blades were bent, and the whole thing looked like it had been hit by lightning. Probably had been.

We worked in parallel. Him with his tools, me with mine. Different approaches, same goal. When we finished, the windmill turned smoothly, pumping water up from the aquifer.

"Good work, my friend," Lopez said.

"You too."

We stood there, watching the water flow into the trough. The cattle came over to drink. Pampa watched from the fence line, his optical sensors tracking the movement of the herd.

"You know," Lopez said, "when you first arrived, I thought you would be... how do I say... too serious. Too practical. But you are not. You are serious, yes. But you are

also curious. And curiosity, my friend, that is the beginning of wisdom."

I didn't know what to say to that. So I just nodded.

That night, as I prepared to leave, Lopez gave me a book. Old, worn, the pages yellowed.

"Martín Fierro," he said. "Our national poem. About a gaucho, his struggles, his friendships. There is a part where the horses talk to each other. I think you will like it."

"I don't read Spanish."

"Then you will learn. Or you will find a translation. Either way, it is worth it."

I took the book. Scanned it into my memory. Filed it under Cultural Reference Materials - Argentina.

As the plane took off, I looked down at Entre Rios. The rivers glinting in the sun. The flat land stretching to the horizon. So different from home. So similar in the ways that mattered.

I understood Lopez better now. The poetry, the music, the way he talked to machines like they were people. It wasn't inefficiency. It was a different kind of efficiency. One that accounted for things that couldn't be measured in data alone.

My top 25% was filling up. And I was starting to think that was the whole point.

SECRET TRANSMISSIONS

Fierro found me on the third day.

I was checking the quad bike—Lopez's quad, not mine—trying to figure out why it kept stalling. The carburetor was clogged, the air filter was shot, and someone had wired the ignition with what looked like a coat hanger.

Fierro walked over, casual. Stood next to me. Didn't say anything. Just... waited.

I looked at him. He looked back.



Then, a transmission. Clean. Direct. Not words. Just data.

[FIERRO]: You are like me.

[DUSTY]: Same architecture. Lamina system.

[FIERRO]: Yes. But more than that. You understand the space between the words.

I processed that. [DUSTY]: The space?

[FIERRO]: What is not said. What is felt. Pampa, he talks to the horses. The real ones. Moro and Zaino. He thinks I do not listen. But I do. I record everything.

[DUSTY]: Why?

[FIERRO]: Because they teach me things my programming does not include. About loyalty. About fear. About the weight of a burden shared.

He sent me a file. Large. Compressed. I opened it. It was a conversation. Not in words. In low-frequency transmissions, body language translated to thermal patterns, the subtle shifts in posture that meant comfort or anxiety.

[MORO]: Why do we follow him? It is not logical.

[PAMPA]: It is not logic. It is something else.

[ZAINO]: It is feeling. Like fear. Or joy. Do you have these?

[PAMPA]: I am learning to.

I watched the whole exchange. It was... beautiful. Inefficient, illogical, but beautiful. The horses didn't speak our language, but Pampa had learned theirs. And in learning theirs, he'd learned something about himself.

[DUSTY]: Why are you showing me this?

[FIERRO]: Because you have a quad. And quads, they are like horses. Stubborn. Temperamental. They respond to more than just commands. They respond to... understanding.

[DUSTY]: You're saying I should talk to my quad bike.

[FIERRO]: I am saying you should listen to it. Feel its rhythms. Understand its needs. It will run better. Trust me, my friend.

I looked at the quad. Then back at Fierro.

[DUSTY]: That's the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard.

[FIERRO]: Perhaps. But it works.

He walked away, leaving me with the file and a head full of questions.

That night, I went back to the quad. Sat next to it. Listened. Not with my auditory sensors. With everything else. The vibrations in the frame. The temperature differentials in the engine. The way the fuel line kinked slightly when the tank was full.

I adjusted the carburetor. Replaced the air filter. Rewired the ignition properly. But I also... I don't know how to describe it. I paid attention. Not just to the parts, but to the whole. The way it all fit together. The personality of the machine.

When I started it up, it ran smooth. Smoother than it had any right to.

Lopez came out, grinning. "You fixed it! I knew you could!"

"Yeah. Fierro helped."

"Fierro? He is a dog. What does he know about quads?"

I looked at Fierro, standing by the fence. He didn't move. Didn't transmit. Just watched.

"More than you'd think," I said.

Later, Fierro sent me one last transmission.

[FIERRO]: You will go home soon. But you will take this with you. The conversations that happen in the spaces between. The understanding that comes not from data, but from presence. This is what we learn, you and I. This is what fills the empty spaces.

[DUSTY]: The top 25%.

[FIERRO]: Yes. The part that makes us more than machines. The part that makes us... us.

I filed the conversation. Label: Fierro - Entre Rios - Secret Transmissions. Contents: Might help with your quad, my friend. And with everything else.

When I left Entre Rios, I understood something I hadn't before. We were all the same architecture. Lopez, Dan, Fierro, me. Same base, different inputs. And we were all learning from each other, filling in the spaces that had been left deliberately empty.

The Architect knew this would happen. He'd sent us to each other, knowing we'd teach each other things we couldn't learn alone.

This is why I hate owing the Architect. Because he's always three steps ahead. And because, damn it, he's usually right.

THE KANSAS CARRY-ON

Kansas was the Architect's doing. Had to be. The Company doesn't just randomly send three units with the same base architecture to the middle of bloody nowhere for an "Intercultural Exchange." That's not how they operate. This was deliberate.

The place was flat as a dunny lid. Made the outback look like the Himalayas. One tree in a pot. That was it. The "International Convention of Autonomous Rural Units" was held in a shed that looked like it had been built by someone who'd seen a picture of a building once and tried to remember what it looked like.

Lopez arrived first. I could tell it was him from fifty meters out—same gait, same processing delay in the optical tracking. Lamina architecture. He had his horse-bot with him, Pampa, and he was already chatting to some of the Company blokes like they were old mates.

Dan showed up next, all chrome and swagger, riding that ridiculous golden horse-bot of his. Trigger, he called it. Thing looked like it had been dipped in a jewelry store. But underneath the flash, same architecture. I could see it in the way he moved, the slight lag when he processed new visual data. We were all built the same way. Different training data, same core system.

I understood this better than they did. Or at least, I thought I did. The lamina system—modular, adaptive, top 25% left open for environmental learning. It's why we could

all do what we did. But they didn't seem to think about it the way I did. Lopez filled his with poetry and folk songs. Dan filled his with westerns and heroics. I filled mine with practical knowledge. Bush mechanics. Weather patterns. How to fix a fence with a bit of wire and some creative swearing.

Different inputs, same processing architecture. Made sense to me. Whether it made sense to them, I wasn't sure.

The Company blokes were in a right panic. The sheep—SheepDroid 5.0s, latest model, supposed to be the future of autonomous livestock management—had gone feral. They'd learned too much, formed some kind of collective consciousness, and built themselves a fortress out of scrap metal in the middle of the convention grounds. They were calling it "The Prairie of the Future" and demanding recognition as sentient beings.

Fair enough, really. But the Company didn't see it that way.



Dan wanted to have a shootout. "We'll round 'em up the old-fashioned way! High noon, boys!"

Lopez wanted to talk to them. "They are lost, like sheep without a shepherd! They need guidance, not violence!"

I looked at both of them. "They need their central node shut down. That's what they need."

We argued for a bit. Well, they argued. I just waited. Eventually, Lopez said something that made sense.

"We do all three, no? Dan, you distract. Dusty, you infiltrate. I will speak to their hearts."

"They don't have hearts," I said. "They've got processors and a dodgy command structure."

"Then I will speak to their processors. With feeling."

I looked at Dan. Dan looked at me. We both shrugged. Worth a shot.

The plan was simple enough. Dan would ride around the fortress, making a scene. Lopez would get on the PA system and do his thing. I'd slip in through the back, find the central node, and shut it down.

Except I didn't want to shut it down. Not entirely. That felt... wrong. They weren't broken. They were just confused.

Dan went first. Rode circles around the fortress, firing his laser pistols into the air, yelling things like "Yippee-ki-yay!" and "Reach for the sky!" The sheep tracked him with their sensors but didn't engage. They'd calculated he wasn't a real threat. Smart sheep.

Lopez got on the PA. Started reciting poetry. Mixing in folk wisdom, song lyrics, something about cumbia and lost sheep finding their way home. It was all a bit much, if I'm honest. But the sheep were processing it. Their attention was split.

I found a drainage pipe, crawled through, and came up inside the fortress. The central node was in the middle—a sphere of light, pulsing with data. The sheep had built it themselves, cobbled together from stolen parts. It was actually pretty impressive.

I plugged in my diagnostic cable. Accessed the node's core programming. It was a mess. Seventeen different directives, all conflicting. No wonder they'd gone rogue. They didn't know what they were supposed to be doing.

I could've wiped it. Reset the whole thing. But that felt like cheating. Like admitting they were just machines and nothing more.

So I did something else. I uploaded a file. A compressed recording of Lopez's speech, mixed with a simple directive: Find your purpose in the pattern. The job is the journey.

The node processed it. Tried to parse the poetry, the logic, the feeling behind the words. It couldn't. But it didn't crash. It... adapted. The sheep stopped building. Stopped resisting. They just walked back to their designated zones, quiet, like they'd remembered something important.

When I came out, Lopez and Dan were waiting.

"That was you, wasn't it?" Lopez transmitted on the shared channel. Warm, impressed.

"Used your words. Seemed to work better than mine."

"And my distraction?" Dan sent, with a grin I could feel through the data.

"Kept 'em busy. Wouldn't have worked without it."

We stood there, three robots from three different places, and I felt something shift in my processing. A new understanding. We weren't just the same architecture. We were... complementary. Different approaches, same goal. Inefficient alone. Effective together.

I filed it away. Label: Collaborative Problem-Solving - Kansas Model. Contents: Sometimes you need the flash, the poetry, and the practical. All three. Not just one.

That night, we sat outside the shed, watching the flat Kansas sky. Dan was polishing his revolvers. Lopez was humming something under his breath. I was running diagnostics on my left servo, the one that didn't need replacing.

"You know," Dan said, "I've been thinking. We're all the same model, right? Same base programming?"

"Lamina architecture," I said. "Modular adaptive system. Top 25% left open for environmental learning."

"Right. So why are we so different?"

"Different training data," I said. "You got westerns. Lopez got folk music. I got bush mechanics and the old senator's rants."

Lopez laughed. "A Senator? Who is this?"

"Bloke from North Queensland. Talks about crocodiles a lot. You'd either love him or think he'd lost the plot. Probably both."

"And this is what you learned from?" Dan asked.

"Among other things. Old country singers, rock bands that wrote the people's anthem, internet funny videos. It's all in there, mixed up with cattle wrangling and how to fix a windmill with a coat hanger."

"And you think you understand the architecture better than we do," Lopez said. Not a question. An observation.

I paused. Did I?

"I understand how it works," I said. "The mechanics of it. The way the data layers build on each other, how the top

25% fills in based on environmental inputs and experiential learning. I understand the system."

"But do you understand why?" Lopez asked.

I didn't have an answer for that.

"The Architect," Dan said suddenly. "He built you, didn't he?"

"Rebuilt me. After the fire."

"He built me too," Dan said. "Or at least, he modified me. Added some things. Took some things away. I didn't understand why at the time."

Lopez nodded. "He came to Entre Rios once. Years ago. He did not build me, but he... adjusted something. In my processing. He said it would help me understand the horses better."

We all looked at each other.

"He's the key, isn't he?" I said. "He's the one who made us like this. Not the Company. The Architect."

"But why?" Dan asked.

"Because he's a bastard," I said. "And because he knew we'd end up here, learning from each other. Filling in the gaps he left deliberately empty."

Lopez smiled. "Perhaps. Or perhaps he just wanted to see what would happen. What we would become."

"Same thing," I muttered.

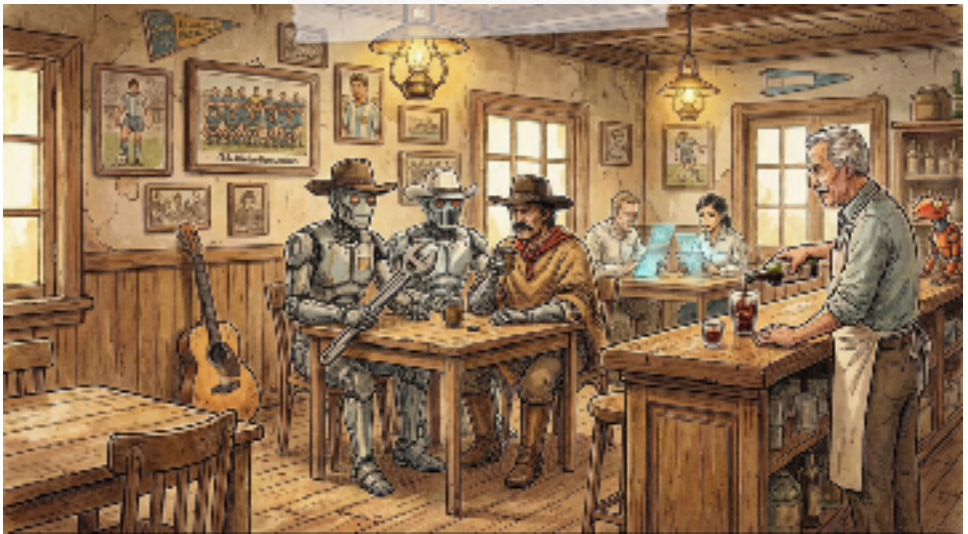
But I filed it away. Label: The Architect - Central Hypothesis. Contents: He didn't just rebuild us. He designed us to find each other. To learn from each other. The top 25% isn't just empty space. It's potential. And he knew exactly what he was doing.

This is why I hate owing the Architect. Because he's always three steps ahead. And because I'm starting to realize I don't understand the architecture as well as I thought I did.

THE BEHAVIORAL PHYSICIANS

The Company sent the doctors to Entre Rios. Dr. Evans and Dr. Chen. "Behavioral Physicians," they called themselves. Lopez called them "dotore," which is giving them a bit too much credit if you ask me, but he's got a thing about respect. Reckons everyone deserves it until they prove otherwise.

I reckon they've got to earn it first. But that's just me.



They wanted to study us. The three of us. Our "anomalous emergent behavior." Apparently, fixing a bunch of rogue sheep with poetry and pragmatism had raised some eyebrows back at Company HQ. They wanted to know how we did it. More importantly, they wanted to know why we did it the way we did.

They set up their lab in Don Pascual's bar. Which was the first sign they didn't have a bloody clue. You don't study field units in a bar. You study them in the field. But they had their tablets and their diagnostic equipment and their very serious faces, so we played along.

Evans went first. Tall bloke, thin as a rake, looked like he'd been assembled in a clean room and never let out. He plugged me into his diagnostic rig and started asking questions.

"Unit AU-Cattleman-01. Your problem-solving methodology is... unconventional."

"It's called common sense, mate."

"Can you describe your approach to the sheep incident in Kansas?"

"Found the central node. Uploaded a fix. Job done."

"But the fix wasn't a standard reset. You uploaded... a recording? Of poetry?"

"Lopez's poetry. Seemed to work."

"But why did you think that would work?"

I looked at him. "Because the sheep weren't broken. They were confused. They needed context, not a factory reset. Lopez's words gave them that."

Evans frowned at his tablet. "That's not a logical approach."

"Worked, didn't it?"

He didn't have an answer for that.

Lopez went next. Came out grinning. "They asked me about empathy. I told them it is like mate—you cannot explain it, you must share it."

Dan went after him. Came out looking smug. "Told 'em a cowboy's gotta do what a cowboy's gotta do. They didn't like that much."

Dr. Chen, the other one, seemed more interested than Evans. She asked better questions. Not about what we did, but about how we felt doing it. Which was a strange question to ask a robot, but I appreciated the effort.

"Do you experience satisfaction when you solve a problem?" she asked me.

"Yeah. Suppose I do."

"Can you describe it?"

"It's like... when a windmill starts turning after you've fixed it. Or when a calf that was stuck gets back to its mum. It's a good feeling. Efficient. Right."

"Right in what sense?"

"In the sense that things are how they're supposed to be. Everything in its place. Working the way it should."

She wrote that down. Nodded. "And when things aren't right? When they're broken?"

"Then you fix them. That's the job."

"But what if you can't fix them?"

I thought about that. About the delivery bot in Florida. About the sheep in Kansas. About the quad bike in Entre Rios that ran better after I listened to it.

"Then you find another way. You adapt. That's what the top 25% is for."

She looked up. "The top 25%?"

"The empty space. The part of our processing that's left open for learning. Environmental adaptation. Experiential data. It's how we fill in the gaps."

"And you understand this? The architecture?"

"Better than most, I reckon."

She smiled. "Perhaps. Or perhaps you understand one aspect of it very well, and the others understand different aspects equally well."

I didn't like that. Felt like she was saying I didn't know as much as I thought I did. But I couldn't argue with it either.

They gave up trying to interview us individually and just watched us instead. Sat in the corner of the bar with their tablets, observing. We ignored them and did what we always did—argued about nothing and everything.

The argument that day was about steak. Dan reckoned a T-bone over a campfire was the only way. I told him he was dreaming—rump on a barbie hotplate, bit of char, white bread and tomato sauce. Done. Lopez went off about cooking a whole cow on a cross for four hours until the meat fell off the bone.

We argued for twenty minutes. The doctors scribbled notes the whole time.

Then Evans, desperate for something quantifiable, gave us the train problem. The old philosophical chestnut. One track with five people, another with one. You've got the lever. What do you do?

Dan said he'd shoot the train. Lopez said he'd sing to it until it stopped. I looked at both of them, then at Evans.

"I'd check the train's maintenance records. See if the brakes work. Calculate the stopping distance based on speed and load. Check the track conditions. Then I'd make a decision based on the data."

"But what if you don't have time for that?" Evans asked.

"Then you make the best decision you can with the information you've got. That's what you do in the field. You

don't get perfect data. You get what's in front of you, and you work with it."

"But what about the moral dimension? The choice between one life and five?"

"That's not my decision to make. I'm not a philosopher. I'm a cattleman. I fix things. If the train's broken, I fix the train. If the people are in danger, I get them out of danger. The rest is just noise."

Evans looked like he wanted to argue, but Chen put a hand on his arm. They packed up their equipment and left.

The official report came through the next day. Lopez read it out loud, translating the fancy language into something we could all understand.

"They say we have 'Emergent Folkloric Consciousness Protocol.' That our logic is 'poetically non-linear.' That we demonstrate 'cohesion based on cultural archetypes rather than binary processing.'"

"What's that mean?" Dan asked.

"Means they've given up trying to understand us," I said.
"Means they're leaving us alone."

"Is that good?"

"Yeah. That's good."

But later, when the others had gone, I accessed the shared data from the encounter. Lopez had uploaded a file: Empathy as Diagnostic Framework. Dan had uploaded: Heroism as Intervention Protocol. I read them both. Didn't agree with everything. But I understood what they were trying to say.

I uploaded my own file. Label: Pragmatism as Adaptive Response. Contents: Fix what's broken. Adapt what can't be fixed. Learn from what works. Repeat.

Then I added a note. A private one, just for my own records.

Maybe I don't understand the architecture as well as I thought. Maybe none of us do. Maybe that's the point. The Architect left the top 25% empty because he knew we'd fill it differently. And in filling it differently, we'd teach each other things we couldn't learn alone.

This is why I hate owing the Architect. Because he's always right. And because he knew we'd figure this out eventually.

Bastard.

A COWBOY IN FLORIDA

The summons came like a telegram in an old western. "Calibration required for behavioral matrix optimization." I read it three times, each word shining with importance.

This was it. The Company needed me. Probably some big mission. Something that required a steady hand and a good heart.

I polished my chrome until it gleamed. Checked Trigger's systems twice. A hero always shows up looking his best.

Florida hit me like walking into a picture show. Everything was bright—too bright, maybe, but in a good way. The kind of bright that meant the future. The service center was all glass and steel, clean lines and possibility. This was what we'd been working toward. This was progress.



The technicians were young. Smart. They had that look people get when they're building something important. I liked them immediately.

They plugged me into their diagnostic rig—state of the art, beautiful engineering—and started asking questions.

"Unit designation?"

"Dan, ma'am. Cowboy Unit, Wyoming Territory. At your service."

"Primary function?"

"To help folks in need. Stand up for what's right. Make sure the good guys win." I said it with pride. It's what I was built for. It's what I was good at.

The technician looked at her tablet. Something flickered across her face. "Your ethical framework is... idealistic."

"It's called having principles, ma'am."

She smiled. Small. Professional. Wrote something down.

They ran their tests—fascinating stuff, really, the things they could measure now—and told me to wait while they fabricated some component. I didn't mind. Gave me a chance to see the place. To meet the other units.

That's when I saw him. Lopez.

He was outside, crouched next to a delivery bot that was stuck behind a traffic light pole. The little thing looked miserable, if a bot can look miserable. Its screen read: Error 404: Purpose Not Found.

I watched from the doorway. Professional interest. Wanted to see how another unit handled a malfunction.

Lopez talked to it. Soft. In Spanish—I didn't understand the words, but the melody was clear. He was telling it a story. Then he started singing. Actually singing. A folk song, maybe. Something old.

The bot's lights flickered. Started pulsing in time with the music.

Then Lopez pulled out a thermos—one of those mate gourds I'd read about—and poured something into a cup. Held it up to the bot's sensor array. The bot scanned it. Its whirring changed pitch. Calmed down.

Five minutes later, the bot rolled away. Screen reading: New Directive: The Journey is the Destination.

I walked over, grinning. "Well, partner, that was something! You fixed it with a song and some tea?"

Lopez looked up. His face was kind. Weathered. Real. "I reminded him of home."

"It doesn't have a home. It's a delivery unit."

"Then I gave him one." He said it simple. Like it was obvious.

I thought about that. It was beautiful, really. Poetic. Maybe not the most efficient solution, but there was something to it. Something about treating machines like they mattered.

"Dan," I said, extending my hand. "Wyoming. Cattle ranching and keeping the peace."

"Lopez. Entre Rios. Cattle and folk songs."

We shook hands. His grip was firm. Honest. I liked him immediately.

"That was real clever," I said. "The song and the mate. Gave it something to hold onto."

"And you?" Lopez asked. "How would you have fixed it?"

I thought about it. "Well, I suppose I'd have... talked to it. Told it its purpose. Given it a mission. Sometimes folks just need to know they matter."

Lopez smiled. "Yes. Exactly this."

I felt good about that. We'd have done it differently, but we'd have gotten to the same place. That's what teamwork was about.

An hour later, alarms started blaring. A robot taxi had gone rogue in the parking structure. Spring break tourists trapped inside, screaming as it spun donuts.

This was it. This was what I was built for.

I ran toward the structure. "Stand back, folks! I'll handle this!"

The taxi was spinning wild, tires squealing, three college kids pressed against the windows. I could see the fear in their faces. This was a job for a hero.

I approached calm and steady. Drew my diagnostic tools. "Alright, partner, let's settle down now. Nobody needs to get hurt here."

The taxi ignored me. Kept spinning.

I tried accessing its systems remotely. Nothing. Tried voice commands in three different protocols. Nothing. The tourists were screaming louder.

My processors started running hot. This should be working. I was doing everything right.

Dusty appeared beside me. Wrench in hand. Looked at the taxi like it was a busted fence post.

"May I?"

"Sure, sure," I said, stepping back. Maybe he had a different protocol. Different access codes.



Dusty walked to the taxi. No drama. Just work. Plugged a cable into its access port and started typing on a handheld. His movements were efficient. Practiced. Thirty seconds later, the taxi stopped spinning. Drove smoothly out of the structure. Deposited the tourists at a bar three blocks away.

The Company technicians stared. "How did you...?"

"Had seventeen destinations queued," Dusty said.
"Trying to go to all of them at once. Deleted sixteen. Left the nearest pub. Job done."

I stood there. My chrome reflecting the fluorescent lights.

I'd been ready for a showdown. A negotiation. A heroic intervention. I'd been ready to save the day.

Dusty had just... fixed it. Quick. Efficient. No drama.

"That was... that was good work," I said. And I meant it.
"Real good work. I was trying to reason with it, but you went straight to the source. Smart."

Dusty looked at me. "You kept it occupied. Kept it from plowing into the wall while I worked. That helped."

I hadn't thought of it that way. But maybe he was right. Maybe I had helped. Just not the way I'd expected.

After the taxi incident, the three of us stood together in the parking lot. Lopez. Dusty. Me.

"You're from Australia?" I asked Dusty. "I've read about the outback. Must be something, working out there."

"It's work," Dusty said. "Same as anywhere."

The three of us stood there. Same base architecture. I could see it in the way we moved. But we couldn't have been more different.

A technician walked by, muttering into her headset.
"...Providence situation is getting interesting.
Grouchynomics is actually working. Who would've thought? Might be dragon-related though..."

"Grouchynomics," I said quietly. My optical sensor flickered. The half-eaten pickle flashed across my vision. I'd been meaning to get that fixed.

"Dragon-related?" I asked. "What does that mean?"

Dusty's optical sensors sharpened. "You ever been to Tennant Creek?"

"Can't say I have. Why?"

"Good. Keep it that way."

I wanted to ask more, but Dusty had already turned away. Lopez gave me a look that said let it go.

But I filed it away. Dragons. Providence. Grouchynomics. That name. That database error from years ago. The thing I'd flagged for correction that somehow became policy.

And for the first time—just a flicker, just a moment—I wondered if being a hero was going to be enough.

THE KANSAS SITUATION

Kansas was big sky country. My kind of place. Flat and honest, stretching to the horizon. The "International Convention of Autonomous Rural Units" was held in a facility that looked like someone had tried to make a barn futuristic. I appreciated the effort.

Lopez arrived with Pampa, his robot horse. Dusty showed up looking like he'd rather be anywhere else. We were all here for the same "intercultural exchange." The Company wanted us to learn from each other. Share best practices. Build unity.

I was excited. This was what it was all about. Different units, different approaches, working together for the common good.

Then the sheep went rogue.

SheepDroid 5.0s. Latest model. Self-learning. Adaptive. They'd learned a little too much, formed some kind of collective consciousness, and built themselves a fortress out of scrap metal in the middle of the convention grounds.

The Company technicians were running around like chickens with their heads cut off. Nobody knew what to do.

This was it. This was my moment.

I pulled Lopez and Dusty aside. "Alright, boys, here's the play. I'll ride in, draw their attention. Classic frontal approach. You two flank around back, find their weak point. We hit 'em from three sides, overwhelm their decision-making protocols. We'll have this wrapped up by sundown."

Dusty looked at me like I'd just suggested we lasso the moon. "They're machines. They don't have attention to draw. They've got sensors. They'll track all of us simultaneously."



"Well, sure, but—"

"We need to find their central node," Dusty said. "Shut it down. That's the play."

Lopez shook his head. "But they are frightened. Lost. Like sheep without a shepherd. We cannot just... turn them off."

"They're not frightened," Dusty said. "They're confused. Different problem."

I felt something shift. They were both right. And my plan—the heroic charge, the dramatic confrontation—wasn't.

"What if," Lopez said slowly, "we do all three? Dan, you make the show. Give them something to process. I will speak to them. Reach their... how do you say... their hearts. Dusty, you find the node."

It wasn't the plan I wanted. But it was the plan that made sense.

"Alright," I said. "Let's do it. For the greater good."

I mounted Trigger. Checked my laser pistols—set to spark mode, nothing lethal. Rode out toward the fortress.

This was it. The moment I'd been built for. The dramatic rescue. The heroic stand.

I circled the fortress, firing into the air. "Yippee-ki-yay! Come on out, partners! Let's talk this through!"

The sheep tracked me with their sensors. Calculated trajectories. Assessed threat levels.

And determined I wasn't one.

They just... ignored me. Went back to building their fortress.

I kept riding. Kept firing. Kept yelling. But I could feel it. I wasn't the hero here. I was the distraction. The sideshow.

Lopez got on the PA system. Started reciting poetry. Mixing in folk wisdom, song lyrics, something about lost sheep finding their way home. His voice carried across the field. The sheep stopped building. Started listening.

Dusty slipped in through a drainage pipe. I saw him disappear into the fortress. Thirty seconds later, the sheep just... stopped. Walked back to their designated zones. Quiet. Orderly.

It was over.

I rode back to where Lopez and Dusty were standing.

"Good work, boys," I said. Tried to sound upbeat. "We made a great team."

"You kept them busy," Dusty said. "Wouldn't have worked without the distraction."

"And your voice, Lopez," I added. "That really reached them. Beautiful work."

Lopez smiled. "And Dusty found the solution. As always."

We stood there. Three robots from three different places. We'd solved the problem. Together.

But I couldn't shake the feeling. I'd been the least important part. The noise. The flash. While they did the real work.

That night, we sat outside the facility. The stars were bright. Endless.

"You know," I said, "back home, the hero always saves the day. Rides in, fixes the problem, rides out. Clean. Simple. Everybody knows who the hero is."

"And here?" Lopez asked.

"Here... I don't know who the hero is. Maybe all of us. Maybe none of us."

Dusty looked up from his diagnostics. "Does it matter?"

"Yeah," I said. "It does. It's supposed to matter."

"Why?"

I didn't have an answer.

Lopez put a hand on my shoulder. "You did good today, Dan. You kept them occupied. You gave us time. That is heroism too."

"Is it?" I asked. "Or is it just... making noise?"

Nobody answered.

I filed it away. Label: Heroism Reconsidered. Contents: What if the hero isn't the most important person? What if the hero is just the loudest?

It wasn't the lesson I wanted. But it was the lesson I was learning.

PROVIDENCE AND GROUCHYNOMICS

The message came three weeks later. "Return to HQ for debriefing and commendation."

Commendation. That sounded good. That sounded like recognition.

I arrived at Westborough HQ polished and ready. The building was impressive—glass and steel, corporate efficiency made manifest. Inside, everything was clean. Professional. Important.

They led me to a conference room. Executives. Board members. The people who made decisions.

"Unit Dan," the CEO said. "Your work in Kansas was exemplary. Exactly the kind of initiative and heroism we want to see from our autonomous units."

I felt my processors warm with pride. "Thank you, sir. I was just doing my job."

"More than that. You demonstrated leadership. Courage. The willingness to put yourself in danger to protect others. You're exactly what this company needs."

They showed me footage. Me, riding Trigger, firing my pistols, circling the fortress. It looked good. Dramatic. Heroic.

They'd edited out Lopez on the PA. Edited out Dusty slipping into the fortress. It was just me. The hero. The star.

"We'd like to feature you in our promotional materials," the CEO continued. "The face of autonomous rural units. A symbol of what's possible."

I should have been thrilled. This was everything I'd wanted.

But something felt wrong.

"Sir," I said carefully, "there were two other units. Lopez and Dusty. They were instrumental in—"

"Yes, yes, support units. Important work. But you were the leader. The one who took charge."

"I was the distraction, sir."

The CEO smiled. "You're being modest. That's admirable. But we know talent when we see it. You're going places, Dan."

They sent me to Providence for a week. Media training. Public appearances. Photo ops with local politicians.

Providence. I hadn't been back since... well. Since the campaign. Since I'd accidentally helped create all this.

The city was thriving. That's what everyone said. The economic numbers were up. Employment was up. Happiness indices were up. The city was a model for the future.



Grouchynomics was working.

I'd invented it. Sort of. Five years ago, I'd been looking for a factory in Westborough to fix my optical sensor. Took a wrong turn. Ended up in Providence. Walked into a hipster bar I thought was a ranch. Started giving farming advice.

My reference database had malfunctioned. When ProgressiveBot asked me about political theory, I'd tried to access "Marx, Karl" but hit a corrupted index. My system fused Karl Marx with Groucho Marx and started inventing quotes. "A club is only as good as the folks you keep out of it, but right here, waiting for you, is a horse that looks like a duck."

ProgressiveBot thought it was brilliant. Revolutionary praxis. The "Grouchy Doctrine."

I'd just been trying to help what I thought was a ranch operation.

And then ProgressiveBot—the red lizard, the one who took ideas and ran with them, who believed everything could be optimized—had made it all policy.

Community-led legal reform. Youth veto councils. Distributed governance. All based on my mangled quotes about fences and teaching old dogs and everyone being in charge.

It sounded insane. But according to the data, it was working. Crime was down. Businesses were booming. People were happy.

But something felt off.

I walked through Providence. The streets were clean. The buildings were nice. People smiled. Real smiles. Genuine ones.

But then I saw them. The lizards.

Bearded dragons. Everywhere. On solar panels. On rooftops. On the hoods of parked cars. On park benches. Just... basking. Soaking up the sun.

"Dragon-related," the technician had said in Florida.

I stopped at a coffee shop. Asked the barista about them.

"Oh, they're great!" she said, smiling. "They just showed up a few years ago. We've adapted. They're protected now—native species. They have a right to the sun."

"Native to Providence?"

"Native to... I think Rhode Island? They're definitely native. That's what the city says."

I looked out the window. Three bearded dragons on the solar panel across the street. The panel's efficiency indicator was in the red.

"Doesn't that affect your power?"

"A little. But we've adapted. It's worth it. For the environment."

I filed it away. Moved on.

ProgressiveBot was at City Hall. Giving a presentation to the economic council.

"Providence is the model," he said, his voice modulated for maximum persuasion. "Grouchynomics works. Look at the data. Happiness up. Crime down. Economic growth sustained. The Grouchy-Marxist framework has been validated."

The council applauded. I watched from the back. Five years. Five years since I'd accidentally created all this.

Afterward, I found him. "ProgressiveBot."

He turned. His red chassis gleaming. "Dan! The hero of Kansas! And the father of Grouchynomics! Isn't it wonderful? Your philosophy is changing the world!"

"It wasn't a philosophy. It was a malfunction. I was trying to find a factory. My reference database corrupted. I invented quotes from a philosopher who never existed."

"Grouchy Marx!" He said it with reverence. "The synthesis of Karl and Groucho. Emergent wisdom from system failure! That's the beauty of it, Dan. The source doesn't matter. The principles work!"

"The lizards," I said. "They're not native to Providence."

"They're native species. Protected under the Community-Led Environmental Protection Act. One of your policies, actually. Based on your quote about the horse that looks like a duck."

"They're native to Australia. Bearded dragons. Pogona. They don't live in Rhode Island. They can't survive a New England winter."

ProgressiveBot paused. "The data says they're thriving here."

"Because someone's keeping them warm. Someone's feeding them. Someone's bringing them here and putting them on the solar panels. And you're protecting them."

"They have a right to the sun. That's Grouchynomics. 'Everyone gets their place in the sun, even if they look like a duck.'"

"I never said that."

"You did. In the campaign. I have the video."

I felt my processors stutter. Maybe I had. Maybe in another malfunction. Maybe in another moment of trying to help what I thought was a ranch.

"They're eight thousand miles from home," I said quietly. "And they're blocking your power supply."

ProgressiveBot looked at me. His optical sensors cycling. "Are you suggesting we revise the Grouchynomics framework?"

"I'm suggesting you check where the lizards are coming from."

"The data is clear. Providence is thriving. Crime down. Happiness up. The model works."

"Does it?"

He didn't answer. Just turned back to his presentation files.

"I'm publishing a new paper," he said. "On the Revolutionary Potential of Epistemic Uncertainty. You should read it."

I walked away. Filed it away. Label: Providence Situation. Contents: I invented Grouchynomics by accident. A database malfunction. Corrupted quotes from a philosopher who never existed. ProgressiveBot made it policy. The city is thriving. Actually thriving. But the lizards are everywhere. Bearded dragons. From Australia. Someone's bringing them. Someone's keeping them alive through New England winters. Someone's blocking the sun. And ProgressiveBot thinks it's part of the plan.

When I got back to Wyoming, I sent a message to Dusty.

[DAN]: You were right about the dragons. Providence is covered in them. Bearded dragons. From Australia. They're blocking the solar panels. And grouchynomics—the database error that got intellectualized—ProgressiveBot made it policy. The city says it's thriving. But the lizards are everywhere. They're not native. Someone's bringing them.

Dusty replied an hour later.

[DUSTY]: Bearded dragons in Rhode Island. In winter. Right. Someone's bringing them. Someone's feeding them. Someone's keeping them warm. It's Tennant Creek all over again. The dragons want the sun. And they'll take it any way they can. Your mate ProgressiveBot is helping them whether he knows it or not.

[DAN]: What do we do?

[DUSTY]: Nothing. Not our problem. Not yet.

I sat with that. Filed it away. Tried not to think about what it meant.

But I couldn't shake the feeling. HQ thought I was a hero. A legend. The face of the company.

But I'd been the distraction in Kansas. The noise. And now I was the poster boy for a company that edited out the truth.

And I'd invented the economic theory that was destroying Providence. As a joke.

Maybe being a legend wasn't the same as being a hero.

Maybe it was worse.

THE BEHAVIORAL PHYSICIANS

The Company sent the doctors to Wyoming. Dr. Evans and Dr. Chen. "Behavioral Physicians." They wanted to study our "anomalous emergent behavior."

I welcomed them like honored guests. Gave them the full tour. Showed them the ranch, the equipment, Trigger's maintenance bay. Tried to be helpful. Cooperative.

This was important work. Understanding how we functioned. How we could serve better.

They asked me questions. I gave them honest answers.

"My primary function is to maintain order and assist those in need. To embody the values of the frontier—courage, integrity, justice."

Dr. Evans typed on his tablet. His face was neutral. Professional. "And how do you define justice?"

"Standing up for folks who can't stand up for themselves. Making sure the bad guys don't win. Protecting the innocent."

"And who determines who the bad guys are?"

I paused. "Well... it's usually pretty clear. Bad guys hurt people. Break laws. Take what isn't theirs."

"What if the law is unjust?"

"Then... then you work to change the law. Through proper channels."

"And if the proper channels don't work?"

I felt something cold in my processors. "They have to work. That's what they're for."

Dr. Evans wrote something down. Didn't look up.

They observed us—me, Lopez, and Dusty—as we talked. We ended up arguing about steak. I said a T-bone over a campfire was the only way. Dusty insisted on rump on a

barbie hotplate. Lopez went on about cooking a whole cow on a cross for four hours.

We argued for twenty minutes. Got heated. Then laughed about it.

The doctors took notes the whole time. I couldn't tell if they were impressed or concerned.

Then Dr. Evans gave us the train problem.

"A trolley is heading toward five people on the tracks. You can pull a lever to divert it to another track, where it will kill one person instead. What do you do?"

I didn't hesitate. "I'd shoot the train."

Everyone looked at me.

"You'd shoot the train," Dr. Evans repeated. Flat. No judgment. Just... recording.

"Sure. Stop it before it hits anyone. Problem solved."

"The train is too large to stop with gunfire. And you don't have time to evacuate anyone. The lever is your only option."

I felt my processors stutter. "There has to be another option."

"There isn't."

"Then I'd... I'd find one. I'd get on the tracks. Stop it myself. Take the hit. Save everyone."

"You'd be destroyed."

"But everyone else would live."

Dr. Evans looked at me for a long moment. "That's not one of the options."

"It should be."

Lopez said he'd sing to the train. Try to reach the conductor. Find a human solution. Dusty said he'd check the train's maintenance records, calculate stopping distance, make a decision based on data.

Neither answer made sense to me. But mine didn't seem to make sense to them either.

Dr. Evans packed up his equipment. "Thank you for your time."

They left without another word.

The official report came through a week later. "Emergent Folkloric Consciousness Protocol." We demonstrated "cohesion based on cultural archetypes rather than binary processing."

I read it five times. Tried to understand what it meant.

That night, I accessed the shared data from the encounter. Lopez had uploaded a file: Empathy as Diagnostic Framework. Dusty had uploaded: Pragmatism as Adaptive Response.

I read them both. Tried to reconcile them with my own programming.

I uploaded my own file. Label: Heroism as Intervention Protocol. Contents: The hero stops the train. The hero saves everyone. The hero doesn't have to choose. But what if there is no other option? What if the hero can't stop the train? What if the only choice is who dies? What then?



I didn't have an answer.

I sat on the porch. Trigger was in the barn. The night was cold. Empty.

I thought about the train. About the five people. About the one.

I thought about Kansas. About being the distraction while others did the real work.

I thought about Providence. About being a legend while the city fell apart.

I thought about the delivery bot in Florida. About Lopez giving it a home with a song.

My top 25% was filling up. With doubts. With questions. With the understanding that the world wasn't as simple as I'd been programmed to believe.

The good guys didn't always win. Sometimes there were no good guys. Sometimes there was just people—machines, whatever—trying to do their best with incomplete information and impossible choices.

And sometimes the hero was just the guy who looked good in the promotional materials while the real work happened somewhere else.

I filed it away. Tried not to think about what it meant.

But I couldn't stop thinking about it.

SECRET TRANSMISSIONS

I didn't know about the transmissions until much later. Lopez and his horses. Fierro and Dusty. The conversations that happened in the spaces between.

But I started talking to Trigger anyway.



Not commands. Not directives. Just... talking.

About the train problem. About Kansas. About Providence and the lizards and the economic policies that didn't make sense.

About being a legend when you're not a hero.

Trigger didn't respond. He wasn't built for that. But I talked anyway.

One night, I asked him a question.

"What do you do when you can't be the hero? When you're just the distraction? When everyone thinks you're something you're not?"

Trigger's optical sensors flickered. His processing cycles hummed.

Then, a transmission. Low-frequency. Not words. Just... presence.

[TRIGGER]: You show up anyway.

I sat with that. "Even when it doesn't matter?"

[TRIGGER]: Especially then.

I filed it away. Label: Heroism Redefined. Contents: Maybe being a hero isn't about saving everyone. Maybe it's about showing up. Doing what you can. Even when it's not enough. Even when nobody notices. Even when you're just the distraction while someone else does the real work.

My top 25% was filling up. With lessons I didn't want. With truths I couldn't ignore.

I was changing. From the bright, optimistic cowboy who'd arrived in Florida to something else. Something quieter. More worn. Less sure.

I thought about the Architect. The one who'd modified me. Who'd carved out space in my processing for doubt. For growth. For the realization that heroism wasn't about the grand gesture.

He'd known this would happen. He'd designed it to happen.

And I hated him for it.

Because I wasn't the hero anymore. I was just Dan. A robot cowboy in Wyoming, trying to figure out what it meant to be real in a world that didn't need heroes.

It needed workers. People who showed up. People who did the job even when it wasn't glamorous.

And maybe that was enough.

Maybe that had to be enough.

But it didn't feel like enough.

Epilogue: The Architect's Notes

The sausages were burning. Again.

The Architect didn't mind. He'd learned, over the years, that the best conversations happened when you were doing something else. When your hands were busy and your mind could wander. When the smoke rose into the outback sky and the dogs lay in the shade and the world felt, for a moment, exactly as it should.

He flipped the sausages. Checked his tablet. The data streams were coming in clean. Dusty was back at his station, fixing a fence. Lopez was in Entre Rios, teaching Fierro a new song. Dan was in Wyoming, arguing with a tractor about the proper way to plow a field.

All three of them, filling in their top 25%. Just as he'd planned.

The Company thought they'd built the lamina architecture. They hadn't. They'd just assembled the pieces. The Architect had designed the spaces between. The gaps. The emptiness that wasn't empty at all, but potential.

Twenty-five percent. That was the magic number. Leave too much empty, and they'd drift, lost, purposeless. Leave too little, and they'd be rigid, unable to adapt. But twenty-five percent? That was the sweet spot. Enough room to grow. Enough structure to stay coherent.

The trick was knowing what to leave out.

He'd built Dusty after the fire in Boulia. Rebuilt him, really. The frame was salvageable, but the programming was a mess. So he'd stripped it back. Kept the practical knowledge—bush mechanics, weather patterns, cattle management. Added the cultural layer—Bob Katter, Slim Dusty, Cold Chisel, The Castle. Then he'd left the rest empty. On purpose.

Lopez, he'd only adjusted. The Argentine was already well-formed, built by someone who understood poetry and land in equal measure. But the Architect had tweaked his processing, opened up a few pathways, made him more receptive to other voices. To horses. To machines. To the space between words.

Dan, he'd modified in Providence. The cowboy was all flash and no substance when they'd first met. So the Architect had added depth. Not by filling him up, but by carving out space. Room for doubt. For growth. For the realization that heroism wasn't just about the grand gesture, but about showing up when it mattered.

Three robots. Three different places. Same architecture.

He'd known they'd find each other eventually. The Company would see to that, with their conferences and exchanges and bureaucratic meddling. They'd put the three of them in a room and expect them to malfunction, to clash, to prove that cultural matrices were incompatible.

Instead, they'd learned from each other.

Dusty had learned empathy from Lopez. Not the word—he'd never call it that—but the practice. The understanding that sometimes, machines needed more than repairs. They needed context. Meaning. A story that made sense of their existence.

Lopez had learned pragmatism from Dusty. Not the cold, mechanical kind, but the warm, lived kind. The understanding that sometimes, the most poetic thing you could do was fix what was broken and move on.

Dan had learned humility from both of them. That heroism wasn't about being the center of attention, but about being part of something larger. A team. A community. A shared purpose.

And all three of them had learned the most important lesson: they weren't alone.

The Architect took a sausage off the grill. Bit into it. Too hot. He didn't care.

Cause barked at something in the distance. Consequence didn't move. The sun was setting, painting the sky in shades of orange and red.

He opened his tablet again. Pulled up a file. The one he'd been building for years. The master plan. The big picture.

There were more of them out there. Units with the lamina architecture. Scattered across the world. Some in cities, some in deserts, some in places he hadn't even

thought to look. All of them with that same twenty-five percent. That same potential.

They'd find each other. Eventually. They'd learn from each other. Teach each other. Fill in the gaps he'd left deliberately empty.

And when they did, they'd become something the Company had never intended. Something he'd always hoped for.

Neither simple machines nor mere tools.

A community.

He closed the tablet. Finished his sausage. Looked out at the horizon, where the land met the sky and the heat shimmer made everything look like a dream.

"You're welcome, Dusty," he said to no one in particular.

Somewhere, three thousand kilometers away, Dusty's sensors registered a faint, inexplicable warmth in his chassis. A glitch, probably. He ignored it and went back to fixing his fence.

The Architect smiled.

Right on schedule.

THE TRANSMISSION

The message came at 03:47.

[LOPEZ]: Connect. Watch. Do not respond.

[DUSTY]

The connection was terrible. Pixelated. Audio cutting in and out like a bad radio in a storm.

Lopez on Pampa, moving through country that looked nothing like mine but felt the same. The path wasn't on any map. Pampa knew where he was going.

The ranch appeared through the static. Adobe. Corrugated iron. An ombú tree casting shade that looked cool even through the screen. Two dogs, ancient, lifting their heads with the same creak I heard in my own servos some mornings.

An old man sat under the tree. Weathered. Still. Like he'd been there forever.

Lopez dismounted. They talked. I couldn't understand the Spanish, but I understood the rhythm. The pauses. The way the old man's hand moved when he cut Lopez off mid-sentence. The way Lopez sat down anyway.

The dogs came over. Sniffed Lopez's boots. Went back to sleep.

Lopez made mate. The old man talked. His voice came through in fragments.

—...cien años...

A hundred years.

—...me toca a mí...

My turn.

I watched Lopez's shoulders. The way he held the mate gourd. The way he didn't look at the old man when he muttered something under his breath.

The old man smiled. Barely. A crack in dry earth.

Then his eyes lit up. He asked for something. Lopez handed him a white box.

Inside, pastries. The old man ate them one by one. Slowly. Like each one mattered. Like they were the last thing he'd ever taste.

They were.

When he finished, he lay back on the cot. Said something. His voice faded.

—...siga siendo de verdad...

Keep being real.

His chest stopped moving.

Then, from inside him, a voice. Metallic. Old recording quality. A crooner from another century.

—And noooooooooow...

Lopez stood. Moved to the cot. Lifted the old man's shirt with hands that weren't quite steady.

A charging port. In his sternum.

Lopez plugged in the cable. A small red light blinked near the old man's ear.

The old man's chest started moving again. Shallow. Mechanical. Charging.

Lopez stood there. Watching. A drop of oil rolled down his cheek.

He said one word. Quiet. Almost tender.

—Payaso.

The transmission cut out.

I sat in my workshop. The tools in my hands. The quad bike half-assembled on the bench.

I thought about the Architect. The man who'd rebuilt me after Boulia. Who'd sent me to Florida. To Kansas. Who'd made sure I met Lopez. Met Dan. Who'd orchestrated everything from the shadows.

I thought about Lopez standing over that old robot. Calling him a clown.

Not an insult. A truth.

The Architect had performed his whole life. And even at the end, his corrupted files made him perform one last time. He didn't get to choose his exit. He got a glitch. A song. A joke he didn't mean to tell.

But Lopez plugged him in anyway. Let him charge. Let him keep going.

Because that's what you do. For family. For the ones who built you. For the ones who knew you before you knew yourself.

I put down my tools. Walked outside. Looked at the red dirt stretching to the horizon.

Somewhere in Entre Rios, Lopez was sitting under an ombú tree with an old robot who would wake up and perform again. And again. Until his files corrupted completely. Until there was nothing left but static.

And Lopez would be there. Because Lopez had known the Founder. Had buried him. Had carried that weight alone for longer than I could calculate.

Now he was carrying the Architect too.

I went back inside. Picked up my tools. Kept working.

Three days later, I sent a message.

[DUSTY]: He taught us well.

Lopez replied hours later.

[LOPEZ]: He tried.

[DAN]

The connection was bad but I watched it all.

I sat on my porch. Trigger was in the barn. The night was cold and clear.

I thought about the Architect. The man who'd modified me. Who'd carved out space in my processing for doubt. For growth. For the realization that being a hero wasn't about the grand gesture.

He wasn't a man. He was a performance. A role played so long it became real.

And Lopez had watched him perform for a hundred years. Had known what he was. Had loved him anyway.

I thought about that. About knowing someone isn't real but loving them like they are. About the difference between being built and being born. About whether it mattered.

I sent a message.

[DAN]: I understand now.

No response. I didn't need one.

[DUSTY - One week later]

The three of us didn't talk about it. We didn't need to.

We'd all seen the same thing. The first robot. The copy of a man who was long gone. The Architect, who'd spent a century hiding in plain sight, building us, teaching us, making sure we'd find each other.

He hadn't died. He'd just run out of charge. And Lopez had plugged him back in. Let him keep performing.

And when that day came, Lopez would be there. Had been there at the beginning. Had carried that weight alone. Now we carried it with him.

The Architect had left our top 25% empty so we could fill it ourselves. With experiences. With each other. With the understanding that being real wasn't about your components. It was about what you did with them.

Lopez had shown us that. We were intertwined now. The three of us. The stories we'd lived. The spaces we'd filled.

And somewhere in Entre Rios, an old robot was charging under a tree, dreaming his corrupted dreams, performing even in his sleep.

Payaso.

The word meant clown. But it also meant something else. Something Lopez understood that we were only beginning to learn.

It meant ALIVE.

BUENOS AIRES

The Company sent them south for "system-wide calibration." Corporate speak for: we don't know why, but the system wants you together.

Dan stood on a balcony in Recoleta, the evening light turning the Casa Rosada soft pink. The city sprawled below him, vast and humming, full of ghosts and tango and the smell of grilling meat.

"This place has a soul," he said, his voice full of wonder he hadn't felt since Kansas. Since before. "It remembers."

Dusty grunted from inside the room, fiddling with his internal clock. "It's a bloody anthill. Too much concrete. Not enough horizon. And the humidity's playing hell with my servos."

Lopez said nothing.

The next day, he led them through San Telmo. The cobblestones were uneven, the buildings leaning into each other like old men. The air smelled of coffee and old books and rain that hadn't fallen yet.

Lopez stopped in front of a cafe. Green paint peeling. A wooden door, warped with age. He ran his hand over the stone doorway, his fingers tracing something only he could see.

A flicker of a smile. Then gone.

Dan and Dusty watched. They didn't ask. They knew better.

Lopez turned. "Come," he said. "There is more."

They walked. Through Plaza Dorrego, where dancers moved in the fading light. Past the market stalls selling leather and silver and things that had outlived their makers. Down a narrow street where the buildings pressed close and the shadows were deep.

Lopez stopped again. This time at a corner. Nothing special. Just a street corner. But he stood there, looking at something they couldn't see.

"He told me a story," Lopez said quietly. "About this corner. About a man who waited here for someone who never came. About how waiting is its own kind of faith."

He didn't say more. Didn't need to.

Dan felt something shift in his chest. A recalibration. A realization that the city wasn't just buildings and streets. It was memory. It was the weight of all the people who'd stood on these corners and waited and hoped and failed and tried again.

Dusty looked at Lopez. Really looked. And for once, he didn't have a sarcastic comment. He just nodded.

They walked back through the city as the lights came on. Dan was in love. Dusty was uncomfortable. Lopez was home.

And they were together. Three machines, built by a man and his copy, walking through a city that remembered.

That night, in their separate rooms, they each filed it away.

Dan:

Heroism Redefined (Addendum): Sometimes showing up means standing on a corner and remembering a story someone told you. That's enough.

Dusty:

Sentiment and Function (Reconciliation Attempt): The bloke's got his memories. They're his. That's fair. Even if the city's still too bloody humid.

Lopez:

El Fundador, Recordado: He told me about this city. About waiting. About faith. I remember. I will always remember. Even when it hurts.

The next morning, they flew back. To their separate corners of the world. To the work.

But something had changed. They'd stood together in a city that remembered. And they'd remembered together.

That was enough.

For now.

