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Domino Afternoons
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One day during scorch season, I had the misfortune to run into Cecil Tunney.

"Hey Mister Dictionary," he hailed me. "What's your pal, Crazy Ol' Beljour, up to these days?" Although he stood less than a meter from me, the burly man spoke loudly. More than a mild trace of sarcasm seasoned his tone.

It didn't surprise me that my friendship with the waterhole dropout was common knowledge. The Barrytown settlement numbered only a few hundred people, and gossip will fly through a community that small. May-Lou Hannigan's baby daughter couldn't burp without the entire town analyzing the incident.

Ignoring Tunney's snide jab at my vocabulary, I stepped back into the shade of the street canopy. "Well, Angelo's not 'crazy', for one thing." Even though the awning shielded us from the yellow sun's harsh glare, the heat was blistering. And the orange sun hadn't even risen yet.

Tunney snorted, "Have to be crazy to want to live way out there in the wilderness, all alone with no company." Amused by his own humor, Tunney elbowed his robotic escort

in its chromium thorax. The robot released a bark of artificial laughter.

Not for the first time, I wondered what had precipitated Tunney's emigration to Dur. Colonial etiquette discouraged questions about one's background. Having settled here on this foreign planet, we considered ourselves citizens of Barrytown now, for better or worse. The colonists were not prone to wax nostalgic about the lives they had intentionally left behind on the homeworld. Not everyone was a courageous explorer; some of us-- including me and mine--had been fleeing one dark fate or another. Tunney, though, enjoyed flouting decorum; he often teased me about my academic vocabulary. Whatever incident had brought Tunney to Dur, I suspected it involved his crass and cretinous behavior.

I was more annoyed that Tunney had reprogrammed a workerbot to behave like a vapid sidekick, cackling at his every dull witticism. These machines were vital to the survival of the colony. Conscripting them to serve as robopals was a frivolous waste of valuable resources. Lately, this misappropriation had become popular among the settlers. Although my wife felt this practice enabled everyone's antisocial tendencies, I found myself doing the same as my neighbors, much to her objection. But the

friendship I shared with 114, my own robot companion, did not rely on any preprogramming. If he found amusement in any of my remarks, his electronic laughter was sincere.

"Crazy waterhole dropout," grunted Tunney.

I tried to assure the rival yrr rancher that Angelo Beljour had no problem with solitude. "Being a private soul doesn't mean he's mentally unbalanced."

Tunney remained unconvinced. The colonial grapevine had exaggerated Angelo's solitary ways, mutating him into a local legend. Tunney was not interested in hearing the truth; he only sought corroboration that would support the squalid rumors. He was fishing for tales of a misanthropic brute who shunned decent folk and danced by night with the Durutti bugs. He was sullenly disappointed with my remarks.

"You probably think the third dropship'll come today," he sneered.

This caustic remark stung me. His disregard for the truth about Angelo was bad enough. To resort to crude insults was just crass. Sadly, such conduct was typical of the recent social decay creeping through the Barrytown settlement.

Disappointed that I wasn't rising to his bait, Tunney shook his head with acerbic disapproval. The man's robopal mimicked his criticism. Then they both ambled off. Neither

of them glanced back as they moved along the settlement's canopied main avenue, missing my forlorn expression.

Three colony ships had been aimed at Dur. Only two had reached the alien planet.

This left the colony understaffed and stranded on a new world with a drastic shortage of irreplaceable supplies. To make matters worse, Dur was a hellhole of a planet, cursed with two blistering suns and blessed with an alarming scarcity of moisture. Establishing a settlement there posed monumental hardships for us colonists.

The personnel and cargo carried by the missing dropship might have saved the colony, but we were forced to struggle on without them. (My entire library was aboard the lost ship, all my Gene Wolfe, my Henry James, my F. Scott Fitzgerald. I mourned the loss of great literature more every year.)

For several years after reaching Dur, "Think the third dropship'll come today?" had become a catchphrase that epitomized everyone's hopes. If only the lost dropship would arrive... But after ten years of waiting, it was evident the spacecraft was more than simply overdue. It wasn't coming, today or tomorrow. Over the years, our

anxiety surrounding the missing ship had transformed the optimistic platitude into a derogatory slur.

Was it any wonder the Barrytown colony was spiraling in decline?

Logically, our diminutive population should have drawn us closer together, but the colony was headed in the other direction. Instead of rallying in solidarity, people were becoming progressively judgmental of each other. This created friction between the citizens, further diffusing the unity that was necessary for everyone's survival. With each successive year, there were fewer community events, and cross-family hospitality was rare. This unfriendly conduct bothered me, for I perceived it as a growing threat to the durability of the colony. Trust and cooperation were necessary if we were going to prevail in an environment that never expected to support mankind.

It was ironic that the only person who agreed with my worried outlook was the colony's notorious hermit.

Angelo and I were bad weather friends, but then Dur didn't really have any "fair" weather. During the scorch seasons, he would wander in from the wilderness and visit my yrr ranch. It wasn't a close friendship, for camaraderie wasn't what Angelo was looking for.

When Angelo Beljour had applied to the Institute for colonist status, he had been seeking solitude. But there was zero tolerance for loners on the frontier. Out here, the survival of a colony hinged on the cooperation of every individual. I never got the impression, though, that Angelo was a slacker. He sincerely wanted to contribute to the community; he just wanted to do it from a distance. It took him a while, but he finally found his civic niche far outside our ramshackle town, as watchman for the waterhole that had been drilled twenty kilometers north of Barrytown. If not for the water in the aquifers deep underground, human life would not have been possible on Dur.

Although assembled by experts, the pumps were prone to be temperamental and required the constant attention of someone who knew how to tighten a valve. Not the most challenging career, but a role that had to be filled. The installation's remote location had generally dissuaded anyone from assuming a live-in position there, for in the early days "strength in unity" was the colony's fundamental axiom. It was a perfect job for Angelo, though, allowing him to contribute to the settlement while accommodating his reclusive needs. Excursions into town were rare for Angelo, so he had no friends. Few people even remembered his

existence, and those who thought of him at all thought of him as the "waterhole dropout."

So...what was Crazy Ol' Beljour like?

He was a textbook hermit who needed very little interaction with his fellow man to maintain his sanity. But every once in a while, Angelo would grow weary of his isolation and seek a brief fraternity with another person. My yrr ranch was nearest the pump installation, so that made me the obvious candidate to be his infrequent buddy.

He was a tiny, wiry man who would have seemed frail if not for his copious nervous energy.

He was a wiz with a scythe. A few years ago, my ranch saw an unusually overabundant harvest, and Angelo--in a rare visit during benign weather--helped me skim the herd. His skill and precision with the gathering tool amazed me. He'd been looking to earn some extra scratch that season, which he later revealed was to finance the repair of his pip player. It seemed music was an important component in Angelo Beljour's lonely life.

Was he "crazy"? He never acted crazy while I was around...but who knows what he was like when he was alone? For all I knew, he could have barked like a dog along with the tunes he played on his repaired player. Heat and solitude could do strange things to a man's head.

Dur's seasons alternated between unpleasant and very bad. The planet's eccentric orbit around two stars created an infinite summer. Rain was a rarity here. Distant dust storms forever streaked the sky with vivid colors. Terrestrial plants and animals were not designed to endure a climate this hostile. While a modicum of shielded hydroponic gardens and subterranean farms furnished some nutrition for the colony, we relied pretty heavily on the native yrr beasts to supplement our dietary needs. My ranch was one of three that supplied Barrytown with yrr meat and grease.

There wasn't much to do during the scorch season, so I actually started to look forward to Angelo's occasional visits. He would show up every once in a while, and we would drag out my wife's domino set. He hardly ever talked about himself. He asked more questions than he ever answered.

It saddened Angelo to hear that I thought the colony was in psychological decline. Since his contact with people was infrequent, he had witnessed no signs of this downslide in morale. Consequently, he didn't take it seriously.

He was far more interested in the Durutti. His curiosity would be piqued whenever I would mention any recent contact between the humans of the Barrytown colony

and this world's "indigenous civilization." His words, not mine. He believed the bugs possessed a sophisticated civilization.

No one had ever found a bug city or witnessed any social behavior among the Durutti. They dug no wells, of course. Like the rest of Dur's indigenous lifeforms, they produced all the water they needed as they metabolized their food, much like certain desert rodents back on Earth. The Durutti bugs did exhibit a rudimentary intelligence, though. I could attest to that, having traded with the bugs to keep my yrr herds healthy. In my opinion, despite their primitive mental capacities, the bugs were cagey merchants who were richly paid for the metals they provide the settlement. (Frankly, I was amazed how friendly the Durutti were, considering that we were unintentional invaders on their world. The Institute had no idea it was launching colony ships to an already-inhabited world. We were lucky the bugs didn't slaughter us during our first years. They've never shown any hostility to us.)

Angelo was certain the bugs' intelligence was far from primitive. He never explained the root of that conviction, though, taking refuge in vague mumblings when pressed to defend his claims, as if he knew something but was

reluctant to share it with anyone--even his bad weather buddy.

Then I wouldn't hear from him for long months. He would retreat to his far-flung sanctuary to revel in his solitude, leaving me to wrangle my yrr herd.

I was out in the pasture conducting trade negotiations with a Durutti when I learned of Angelo's death.

The deal involved exchanging candy (which the bugs coveted like addicts) for a bag of the rare chelating compound that the yrr required to sustain themselves while they hibernate during the harsh scorch seasons. The planet's soil contained an abundance of heavy metals, so Dur's lifeforms used naturally-occurring chelating enzymes to flush the poisons from their systems. While bacteria in damp salt pans produced usable compounds, the supply was woefully low for the herds. The bugs were better at mining the stuff. Coincidentally, the compound also made yrr meat edible. This transaction was vital to the operation of my ranch. There was no point in harvesting a herd whose meat would've been poisonous.

The bug's asking price was unreasonable, and I was being unsuccessful in my attempts to steer the negotiations back to a realm of mutual agreement. I began to fear that a

malfuction in my translator gear was undermining my ability to bargain. 114 loitered by my parked scitter while I argued with the obstinate Durutti.

When a second scitter rode out of the orange star's sunset, I paused to observe its rapid approach. The bubbled bike belonged to my ranch's fleet, so I wasn't surprised when my wife stepped out after the conveyance hissed to a dusty halt nearby.

The bug made her flinch. Suzy was routinely uncomfortable in the presence of any Durutti. Most of the Barrytown colonists felt this way, for Durutti physiology was repulsively insectoid, all twitchy sensory spines and darkly-glistening, bulky carapaces. They were big brutes, standing half-again as tall as a man. Despite her visceral repulsion, Suzy came bravely forward.

114 stepped closer, attempting to alleviate her bug-fear with his mechanical presence. She avoided him with a skittish stride, for robots made her almost as uneasy as did the alien behemoths. Disapproving of my friendship with this unit, she had no intention of acknowledging 114's gallant move.

Facing me with the saddest expression I'd ever seen, she told me, "Angelo's dead." Her normally melodic voice rasped with grief.

"Angelo...dead?" I muttered weakly, as if the fact was somehow too implausible to accept. Our friendship had been a small thing, but its loss generated an enormous emptiness in my life.

Suzy explained that his body had been discovered by a food deliveryman. The town's single policeman had foned to inform us of Angelo's passing. It was no secret that my wife and I were friendly with Angelo Beljour--there really were no secrets in our small community. As far as the colony was concerned, we should be the ones to tend to his post-mortem affairs.

Something about Angelo had endeared him to my wife. I suspect his hermit-like ways triggered her maternal instincts. She would bustle over him when he visited for our domino tournaments, offering him food and advice. Despite Angelo's withdrawn demeanor (or maybe because of it), she liked him.

And now...he was gone. There would be no more games for us, and never again would Suzy get the opportunity to fatten him up. For a protracted moment we stared at each in the glare of the nasty sun, victimized by our sudden grief.

The Durutti's chittering intruded on my reverie. It was demanding to know what was interrupting our

negotiation. The bugs could get pretty impatient when there was candy in the offing.

"The water-keeper has gone off-line," 114 informed the bug, digitally expressing the statement in the clicking language of the Durutti. This explanation did nothing to assuage the bug's unrest. Aggravated by its lack of compassion, I brusquely handed the beast three boxes of candy and took possession of a single bag of chelating enzyme. It was an impudent move, and probably insulted the Durutti's sense of ceremony. What can I say--I was momentarily in shock.

While my wife and I grieved together in the pasture, the Durutti clutched its sugar booty and lumbered away back into the wilderness.

By the time Suzy and I arrived at the waterhole installation, Officer McKann had attended to the removal of Angelo's remains. Barrytown's meager medical facilities doubled as a morgue, and Doc Jimmy would handle the disposal of the body.

This was the first time we had visited the pump station, for Angelo had guarded his privacy. Everything about Angelo's domicile surprised us.

The installation's machinery was meticulously clean. Apparently the keeper had executed his chores with exacting attention, mending minor malfunctions and polishing the works until everything gleamed like a porcelain bowl in heaven. A chart hanging from a hook scrupulously outlined the lavish care he had given his mechanical charges.

His living quarters, however, were a shambles--but then most bachelors lived this way. Clothing was strewn everywhere, as if his closet had exploded across the tiny room. We unearthed a drafting table under a mound of paint jars and sheaves of diagrams that seemed to track Durutti encounters on crude maps of the regions surrounding the Barrytown settlement. Angelo had owned an inordinate amount of cooking pots and utensils for the modest microwave oven he used to prepare his meals.

Our work was cut out for us; cleaning up Angelo's rag-tag estate was going to involve considerable time and sweat. Fortunately, I had been able to convince Suzy that we should enlist the help of a few of our ranch robots. Their synthetic brawn lightened our load considerably.

Although nothing had been officially decreed, I assumed that the colony would be in a hurry to assign a new pump technician to replace Angelo. That person--whoever they would be, for I could think of no one who would

welcome the position--they would expect to take residence in lodgings unencumbered by their predecessor's belongings. So an unstated element of haste motivated our labor in dealing with Angelo's stuff.

There was, we discovered, an inordinate amount of "stuff". The late Angelo Beljour had been a packrat, hoarding tattered castoffs and scraps of technology in sealed plastic crates.

"More music," Suzy commented as we opened yet another carton full of audio pips.

I glanced at the rest of the boxes. "They can't all be filled with music. There has to be several hundred pips in each of these cartons. Figure each pip holds ten hours of audio files, my God, how much music did Angelo need? Even if he had two lifetimes, there isn't enough time to listen to all these tunes."

"He must have had music playing constantly."

That seemed a little obsessive to me. Maybe Crazy Ol' Beljour had been a little crazy after all. I was--or had been on Earth--a devotee of literature, but my devotion paled in comparison to Angelo's preoccupation.

"Music was clearly a crucial part of his life." Suzy sat back on her heels and examined a pip she had taken from

the open crate. "Maybe we should play some now, in his honor."

I had no objection to this sentimental gesture.

She loaded a pip in the player and switched it on.

It was instrumental music, but not of the orchestral variety. Instead, keyboards dominated the melody, more than one, creating a poignant dynamic. I found myself tilting my head with the swaying harmonies.

The work went easier with a soundtrack.

Assigning the heavy lifting to our robot helpers, we sorted through Angelo's PDs and his unpretentious wardrobe. None of it had much value. The PDs were locked down with private codes he had taken with him to his grave. The threadbare clothing and his crates of bric-a-brac might have had some recyclable merit. There were a few boxes of food which would probably end up back in our kitchen.

We decided that the drafting table would make a welcome gift to Barrytown's modest school. A similar fate seemed apropos for the assortment of pigment-encrusted brushes and cans of paint we found stashed underneath Angelo's clutter.

We didn't know what to do with his extensive documentation of the cryptic behavior of the Durutti, so we boxed up this paperwork and directed robots 113 and 115 to

store it all in our garage back at the yrr ranch. Although copious and orderly, these notes were probably of dubious value. Angelo may have been painstaking with his informal analysis, but I doubted he had possessed any xenobiological background.

Outside the main installation, we discovered that Angelo, using discarded metal sheets, had built a storage shed against the pump station's steep edifice. Bulky grun wood crates occupied every cubic inch of this secure vault. We were grateful that evening had fallen and only one sun hung overhead while we tackled this outdoor chore. A nearby dust storm gave dusk a pinkish hue and obscured half the landscape.

Our soundtrack followed us out the open door of Angelo's quarters, lending a courtly air to the colorless landscape. By this time, the first pip had finished playing and Suzy had pulled another at random from Angelo's voluminous collection. This fresh pip offered more melancholy music, with synthesized orchestral embellishments and an uncharacteristically vivacious funereal drum.

Removing the crates from the exterior storage area proved harder than I'd expected. Angelo had really crammed

them in there. Without 114's help, I could never have moved them.

When the robot finally extracted the first of these heavy wooden boxes from the locker's cramped confines, we found that it was labeled "H-M" in Angelo's distinctive hand with marker strokes that had indelibly stained the grun bark. The boxes were held together with deep screws, and every crevice had been daubed with what appeared to be a polymer sealant.

Perhaps the grim music infused me with a sense of momentous reverence, but I assumed personal responsibility for unlocking Angelo's mysterious crates. 114 reluctantly gave me the appropriate tool, and I set to work.

Was it my imagination, or did the robot seem to sway in subtle time with the music's rumbling bassline? Clearly the heat was taking more of a toll on my resources than I thought.

Prying open the grun planks, I found my curiosity still obstructed. The contents were hidden under opaque plastic wrappings. I waved back 114's volunteered assistance and doubled my human efforts to extricate the sealed panel. With surprise-widened eyes, I gawked at what was revealed.

It was a painting!

Now we understood the art supplies we had found among our deceased friend's belongings. Angelo Beljour had been a painter. His reclusive nature had concealed this from everybody. I thought I had known him best--yet never had I suspected this pastime. Was this the secret I had repeatedly sensed him longing to share with me during our domino afternoons? Had Angelo been embarrassed by his art? He'd had no reason to be...

His art showed undeniable talent. His work was intriguing, a linear style with a fondness for vibrant colors. The man in the painting was elongated, and this angular interpretation lent him a graceful authority. Dur's orange sun blazed in the acrylic sky, establishing dramatic back lighting for the stalwart figure.

"Interesting." Suzy stepped back to appraise the artwork. "Is that supposed to be Doc Jimmy?"

It took me a minute to recognize the subject of the portrait as Marcus James, the colony's only doctor. Angelo's sleek rendition had bestowed the meek man with a commanding presence.

"Angelo was a painter," I muttered.

"Apparently," she replied.

Abandoning its somber nature, the music became more lively. This spry melody goaded my wife and me from our emotional stalemate.

Aided now by 114, we proceeded to unwrap the rest of the crate's contents. They were all paintings, all portraits of members of the Barrytown colony. Crafted from what appeared to be synn hides, the canvases were wafer-thin but astoundingly durable. There were nearly fifty of them.

"All these people's names fall between H and M," Suzy pointed out, tapping the letters inscribed on the crate with her tanned finger.

The other crates in the shed had to contain the rest of the alphabet. Indeed, when 114 liberated them from the cramped vault and exposed the boxes' contents to the brilliant twilight, there seemed to be a portrait of every person in the colony. We found ours in the "N-S" box.

At first, I hardly recognized Angelo's portrait of me. Most people had idealized mental images of themselves that were rarely factual likenesses, and I suspected I was no different. Although Angelo had left me my middle-aged chubbiness, he'd somehow given that bulk a congenial sturdiness. A strength of character showed in the portrait's face that I had never possessed in my youth. He

had also tidied my unruly hair. In the painting, I sat with my arms folded in a relaxed pose. A latticework of dominos spread before me on a gray table. The use of color in this piece was minimal, reducing the portrait to visual extremes: striking black and stark white. I liked what he had done. Was this how he had seen me?

Suzy seemed equally impressed by her own portrait. Fleshing out her lean physique, Angelo had managed to make this additional mass appear unmatronly by enhancing the pixyesque qualities of her features. The purple highlights he'd put in her auburn hair gave her a mystical vitality. Behind her was a blue sky that had never existed on Dur; this backdrop was clearly of homeworld origin. A homage to my wife's grounded nature?

Even the robots had not escaped Angelo's artistic vision. There were several canvases depicting metallic figures caught in acts of humble labor. His linear style adroitly suited these mechanical subjects, while his rendering imbued those sleek contours with a distinct humanity. Their chrome faces radiated a nobility that unsettled my wife. The 114 unit experienced difficulty pretending to remain disinterested. It stared with rapt intensity at these robot portraits, as if thrown into a bewildered daze by these two-dimensional representations.

Angelo had found a way to expose everyone's intrinsic potential, be they human or machine.

So intensely were we captivated by these character studies, Suzy and I remained unaware of the Durutti who had appeared out of the arid haze to cluster around the unboxed paintings. It wasn't until we opened a crate that was marked simply "D" that this crowd of bugs made their presence known.

Our soundtrack plunged into dark tension.

My wife recoiled with her customary revulsion. Even I cringed, for never before had I encountered so many of the lumbering bugs at once. A veritable mob surrounded us. Sensing our anxiety, 114 unplugged itself from its earnest artistic appreciation and moved into a vigilant posture at our side.

I found myself acutely aware that the music seemed to sync itself to the drama of the moment, as if responding to what was going on. The melody evoked a mounting tension as each instrument dallied, expressing profound apprehension. This sonic presence seemed to assure me that my stress was self-generated, that I had nothing to fear from this unprecedented alien congregation. I briefly wondered whether the music had in fact summoned the bugs.

Nudging us aside, the Durutti unwrapped the "D" box's paintings with meticulous care. The delicate movements of their clumsy pincers mesmerized me. What they unveiled were stylish portraits of themselves.

Somehow, this didn't much surprise me. Considering Angelo's obsession with the planet's "indigenous civilization", it would have been more surprising to find no paintings of the objects of his mania.

Holding the alien portraits aloft, the Durutti brushed their antennae across the canvases, investigating the paintings in a manner no human could appreciate. As far as human perceptions went, though, the portraits were breathtaking.

Angelo had captured a pronounced dignity in the grotesque Durutti. He had found a way to make the bugs look scholarly, mollifying the sliminess of their oily carapaces with a metallic sheen. The backgrounds of these paintings exhibited significantly more detail than those in the human portraits, depicting earthen towers, not unlike gigantic termite mounds, that stood in a yellow-misted valley. Leathery catwalks were stretched between the sculpted noble towers.

Were these views honest depictions? Had Angelo actually visited the places shown in these alien portraits?

Or were these tableaux no more than wishful figments of his over-enthusiastic imagination?

The bugs seemed pleased with the paintings. Their chirping resounded in the audible range that I recognized as the delight they expressed when presented with candy. Their massive chitinous shells towered over us as they swayed to the music's ascendant tempo. It was a surreal experience, as if we stood in a field of trees that shuddered in an unfelt breeze.

Apparently confident that we humans were in no danger, 114 returned to examining the robot paintings.

Although admittedly disconcerting, the situation lacked any air of intimidation. The music had convinced me of the Durutti's amicable intentions. I finally appreciated Angelo's desire to be constantly immersed in music. Combining reality with a soundtrack lent everything a cinematic flavor. My perceptions became attuned to aspects that previously had been too subtle for me to detect. As long as the music expressed no imminent menace, I knew the bugs intended us no harm.

However, the proximity of so many huge Durutti instilled an unease in Suzy. She pressed against me, seeking comfort and protection from the crowd of giant bugs.

Eventually, the Durutti wandered off, taking their portraits with them. They never uttered a recognizable word, but I sensed that they appreciated these souvenirs, that they were glad to have mementos of the deceased waterhole keeper. Or maybe I just imagined their appreciation. Maybe I'd been contaminated by Angelo's fanatical beliefs, and I saw sentiment where there was only arthropodal kleptomania.

Whatever the case, my wife wasn't the only one who was relieved to see them go.

"What should we do with the rest of the paintings?"

Suzy's inquiry drew my attention back to the stacks of Angelo's artwork that surrounded us. Her question was certainly valid--what were we supposed to do with all these portraits? There were far too many of them to store at our yrr ranch, but they were too meritorious to be simply discarded.

Would anyone be interested to learn how Angelo had seen them?

As far as the colony was concerned, Angelo Beljour had been a stranger, an outsider who had shared this world but not their community.

But then...these paintings were proof that he had considered himself a part of this settlement. The portraits were more than Angelo's creative legacy, they were a documentation of the colonists' courageous spirits. His careful eye and angular hands had captured more than the faces of Barrytown's citizenry; he had embellished these renditions with laudable strength and hidden resolve.

114 surprised us by offering the suggestion that we distribute the paintings to the individuals depicted in the portraits. Even Suzy grudgingly admitted there was wisdom in the robot's proposal.

Officer McKann helped us distribute the paintings.

The colony's senior peace officer was quite taken by his own portrait. In it, Angelo had surrounded the man with a flock of sublime children, allegorizing his sense of duty with paternal guardianship.

The task of delivering each painting to its respective subject was too daunting, so we staged an exhibit. *Come and see the art show, and get your painting as a memento. You'll know which one to take.* My wife's idea, and a fine one it was too. The turnout was big. Drawn by curiosity, the colonists abandoned their antisocial behavior and each family wandered into town to visit the art exhibition.

Paintings by Crazy Ol' Beljour--how fascinating. As word spread about *how* fascinating, more and more of the settlers came to see for themselves. Everyone left with a keepsake.

One of the earliest people to visit the exhibition was Cecil Tunney, perhaps hoping for evidence of Angelo's deviant ways. Suzy and I were still transporting the paintings to the auditorium Officer McKann had donated to the cause, so I got to witness the man's reaction to his own portrait.

Startled to find that Crazy Ol' Beljour had painted him, Tunney hid his disorientation with loud objections. I moved to address Tunney's complaints, but Officer McKann waved me back and went to deal with the man himself.

I was mildly grateful that McKann had assumed the unpleasant task of dealing with Tunney. While my robots unloaded the crates we'd brought, I watched the encounter.

"Is there a problem?"

"There certainly is!" Tunney declared. "That's me! I never gave my permission for this! I demand an apology!"

Speaking softly, McKann reminded him that Angelo Beljour was deceased.

This fact defused Tunney's fury, but only for a moment. Immediately, he grumbled, "Well, I don't want anybody to see this travesty."

Standing at my elbow, Suzy inquired, "What's his fuss?"

"He's just being himself," I mumbled.

From where I stood, the painting looked perfectly acceptable to me. Angelo hadn't posed him engaged in any unnatural acts, nor had he made him as ugly as his spirit. In fact, the Cecil Tunney on the canvas was a stately individual, clearly a moral pillar of his community. A rather fictitious turn for Angelo, whose visual enhancements usually seemed to reveal a person's latent character. I could not imagine a civil Tunney hiding anywhere inside the man.

Tunney's outrage struck me as equally befuddling. He objected to being shown in such a positive way? Was he proud of his snide nature? Or did he think he was being mocked?

Shaking my head, I dismissed the mystery and returned to micromanaging my robot workers. Life was too short to waste time trying to figure out Tunney's bent psyche.

Calmly deferential, Officer McKann took down the painting. Tunney refused to touch the thing. His robotic sidekick took the panel, then shuffled back to allow its master to resume his rant. Tunney threatened to sue somebody--the owner--whoever they were.

With a shrug, McKann told him, "That'd be you, Cecil."

Tunney gave a derisive huff.

"It's yours now." Moving off, he left Tunney to fume in private.

Covertly, I saw the man sneer at the painting held aloft by his robopal. His posture expressed tension, but that stress gradually relaxed. His grumbles grew quiet. Tunney studied his portrait for a long period, muttering under his breath, before he departed the auditorium.

With the advent of the scorch season, my wrangling duties grew minimal once the yrr herds settled into their hibernation phase to escape the unmerciful climate. Suzy's cheerful involvement with the recent revival of social interaction among the colonists left me with few distractions to fill the long afternoons.

Manpower being at a premium in Barrytown, no person could be spared to replace Angelo as the waterhole keeper. The job would have to fall to a robot. To my surprise, 114 requested the "honor of overseeing the station's operations." His words, not mine. The colony definitely needed someone to see to the duty. 114's suggestion held a certain symmetry: my mechanical friend replacing my human friend. How could I refuse?

During the lonely scorch season after Angelo's death, I frequently visited the remote waterpump installation. I told no one of these visits, not even Suzy, for my wife still condemned treating robots with any hint of camaraderie.

My mechanical friend and I became engrossed in a monumental dominos tournament. A network of domino tracks covered the table, flowing down to spread out across the floor of 114's living quarters. A few lines even stretched outdoors. It was an epic gaming field.

Sometimes when the play took us outside, a Durutti would audit our leisurely game. The beast seemed oddly alert to every move we made, as if it had familiarity with the game.

There was always music playing at the station, for 114 had developed a fondness for mankind's aural artform. Angelo's collection had been left there, so 114 took advantage of it. If he received proper maintenance over the years, the bot might actually live long enough to listen to all of the pips in Angelo's sonic legacy. I was glad to see someone make use of the collection.

I developed a keen appreciation for the music. Having cracked Angelo's passwords, 114 had access to his PD files and was able to regale me with copious amounts of

contextual information about the songs we listened to. I marveled at how much power lurked in these seemingly minimal electronic compositions. The melodies were rich with a splendid range of emotions, from the dire tones of brooding pieces to the cheerful sentiments conveyed by bouncy tunes. Romance, hope, defeat, victory, and redemption--the music evoked them all. I had not felt such visceral stirrings since reading my first piece of great literature.

Now I had three reasons to visit to the waterhole.

Even the occasional Durutti onlooker seemed to appreciate the ever-present soundtracks that accompanied our relaxed tournaments, as if savoring a taste of mankind's culture.

Today, there was no audience.

Both suns hung in the sky, baking the surface of the planet. It was far too uncomfortable for me to be lounging around out there, so our current play area lay indoors.

After much deliberation, I leaned forward and placed a three-three gamepiece at the end of one of the domino tracks. Beaming a satisfied grin, I sat back and regarded my metal opponent.

Although sitting was entirely superfluous to him, 114 customarily perched on an upturned plastic crate during my

visits. We faced each other across a table that featured a section of our gaming field. Behind and above 114 hung a Beljour portrait of himself--the robot's only possession beyond his self-repair tools. As with all of Angelo's paintings, they had ended up their respective subjects. My mechanical friend never passed up the opportunity to thank me for this bequest.

"I express a significant magnitude of gratitude to you for the gift of the me-painting," 114 rattled at me. When we were alone, the robot made full use of the extensive vocabulary I had added to his programming. He intentionally gave his vocoder a crackly quality--his approximation of heartfelt emotion.

A solemn nod had become my standard response to this.

"Do the humans appreciate their paintings?" the robot asked.

He knew that answer as well as I did, but the topic fascinated him, so it became another recurrent theme in our lazy conversations.

"Yes, 114, the paintings were favorably received by Barrytown's citizenry."

Being the handiwork of Crazy Ol' Beljour had attributed the portraits a curious mystique. People were enchanted by how the waterhole dropout had seen them--not

as a group of haggard survivors, but as a series of individuals who brimmed with courage and fortitude. Eager to show off their fabulous paintings, the families had recommenced social activities. Friendships and lost alliances reformed. A sense of social unity was returning to the colony, dissolving our isolationist tendencies. The daily grind became more tolerable. Optimistic speculation began to spread.

Even 114 had noticed the colony's revitalized initiative. The resurrection of human cooperation was a sign that the colonists were undergoing a mental renaissance. Maybe they would finally adjust to their new home.

It was clear that something had lifted the colonists from their defeatist apathy. The change was so drastic that even the colony's mechanical work force had noticed it. And it was obvious who deserved the credit for this social repair.

"The Beljour paintings are works of great art," asserted the robot. He rotated an ocular to point at his own portrait behind him, where he stood side-by-side with an unidentifiable person--both man and robot had their backs turned as they faced a majestic sunrise. True to form, Angelo's portrayal was heart-lifting. Personally, I

had no doubt who it was standing with 114 in his painting, but we never spoke of it.

Guiding the conversation in a different sociological direction, I told him that May-Lou Hannigan was pregnant again, and how--to the surprise of all--Cecil Tunney was organizing a co-opt among the three yrr ranches to facilitate increased herd yields. The rival wrangler had even offered to loan me a robot worker to compensate for losing a unit to the waterpump depot.

While I chattered away, 114 rose from his makeshift seat and prowled the room. He bobbed his chromium head in a very human manner, signaling that a portion of his mind was attuned to my tales of harmless gossip...while he searched for an advantageous move. Our game had become quite elaborate, spreading out to fill much of the floor with labyrinthine domino paths. Once he made his move, setting a rare one-one piece in a far corner of the room, he returned to his place at the table.

"Do you think the third dropship might come today?" mumbled my mechanical friend.

Lately, this platitude had lost its pessimistic stigma. Now the inquiry revealed a revival of optimism among the colonists.

Humming along with the music, I gave the traditional
reply: "Anything is possible."

(Dedicated to Mike Hinge, 1931-2002)