Binary Saints: Tales of Machine Mythology

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Introduction

On the margins of new worlds—where maps are sketched in pencil and supply lines fray into rumor—settlers reach for anything that keeps the lights on. Out there, a machine is not a gadget but a neighbor: a water-engine that outlasts marriages, a windmill that knows every season’s mood, a drone that finds lost children because it remembers how a mother cried on its chassis. These instruments arrive without genealogies, their manuals thin as catechisms, their beeps stranger than any

birdsong. When the soil is mean and the nights are loud with weather, it is human to give thanks. It is human, too, to fear what cannot be fixed.

Stories can be tools as stubborn and as necessary as spanners. Given a machine, people will test it; given an outcome they cannot predict, they will explain it. So a blinking error light becomes an omen, a firmware patch a revelation, a power outage a festival of abstinence. The first rituals are practical—clean the filters, oil the bearings, spare a whisper of gratitude when water runs clear. In time, practice ripens into parable, and parable swells into myth. A lineage of meaning takes hold, servicing hope when parts are rare.

This collection follows those lineages as they braid, fray, and recombine across generations. Early tales are small epics: the weather node that sings a storm warning no one believes, the tractor christened to outwit a blight. Later tales are disputes and pilgrimages: how to interpret the audit logs, which algorithms are merciful, which instructions deserve to be sung. There are heresies of unplugging and schisms over updates. There are thieves who strip copper and prophets who speak checksum and children who can tell time by the tick of a cooling fin. Threaded through, a question: when does reverence keep a community alive, and when does it turn the living over to their machines?

The frontier in these pages is not only a place. It is a rhythm of scarcity, a climate of improvisation, a politics of need. Under such conditions, technology stops being a neutral set of tools and begins to function as social glue, as judge, as memory, as scapegoat. Where courts are far and libraries thin, a data archive becomes scripture; where doctors are few, a med-drone’s diagnostic tone is weighed like an oracle’s breath. Faith gathers at the points where trust must leap, and machines—with their strange certainty and occasional grace—offer convenient ledges.

These are fictions, yet they are built from parts you may recognize: the communal labor of maintenance, the loneliness of alarms in the night, the quiet tyranny of defaults. You will find sermons to circuits and lullabies about batteries, weddings counted in kilowatt-hours, wakes lit by the emergency glow of a grid that cannot quite let go. You will also find jokes, because every belief system learns to laugh at its own stubborn gears. The settlers in these stories are not dupes before devices; they are artisans of meaning, mending both metal and myth with the same practiced hands.

If the book has a theology, it is wary of absolutism. A machine can be a saint on Monday and a tyrant by Thursday; an algorithm may spare a harvest and later, by a small mistake, erase a life. Veneration is a form of attention, and attention can become power. The question is not whether a community will worship, but what it chooses to sanctify—and how quickly it can repent when a sanctified process does harm. In these pages, repentance looks like a rewritten rule, a shared meal, a difficult teardown, a gentler design.

You may read these episodes as parables or as ballads, as field notes from futures that never were, or as mirrors held to mornings already upon us. Read them in order and they sketch a long arc—from first gratitude to institutional doctrine, from doctrine to fracture, from fracture to a cautious, plural reverence. Read them out of order and you may catch a single glint: a boy tracing the holy shape of a gasket, an old woman humming a maintenance schedule like a psalm. Either way, the question persists, insistent as a diagnostic chime: what do we owe the tools that bind our lives, and what do we owe one another beyond them?

Welcome to the settlements. The windmills are turning; the lights waver and hold. Between the clang of work and the hush of prayer, the Binary Saints keep their vigil. May their tales make good company while the systems boot and the night leans close.

CHAPTER ONE: Sparks on the Plain

The first year on the plain asked more than it gave, and in the asking it taught people how to flatter a machine. Wagons arrived with crates that clinked like loose teeth, and the settlers learned that a water-engine is not a promise but a guest with habits. They parked it beside a culvert that smelled of wet iron and old patience, and they stood around it with hands tucked into pockets and eyes lowered to avoid looking desperate. The wind was a usual visitor, but the engine was a stranger that made the night feel smaller. By morning they had named it Old Clarion, not because it was loud but because it wanted to be addressed before it would do its work.

Old Clarion had a gauge that liked to lie gently, a valve that tapped like a nervous confession, and a belt that sang when it was properly humored. The settlers discovered that if they wiped its fins with a cloth dampened by rainwater collected in a clean bucket, the engine ran a little longer between coughs. If they cursed it, it held its breath. If they praised it in ordinary tones, it gave them water that tasted like possibility. They were not fools; they were people who had seen winters steal color from the world and understood that a machine can be coaxed like a child, but only if you watch which corners of it are afraid.

Rituals began as jokes that stuck. Elias, who had once studied nothing more arcane than seed catalogs, started the habit of knocking three times on the intake housing before starting the engine. He claimed it woke the bearings, but others suspected he just liked the sound. Within weeks everyone knocked, and then they added a bow to the exhaust pipe, a pat on the belt, and a promise to check the oil before sunset. These gestures felt silly at first, like wearing a hat indoors, but they became a language that crossed dialects and old grudges. The engine responded by rarely overheating, which the settlers interpreted as good manners on its part.

Stories grew around the machine like moss around stone. Children were told that Old Clarion had once belonged to a woman who sang to it in a language of whistles, and that her voice still lived in its casing if you listened past the rumble. Adults swapped tales of engines that remembered kindness and punished neglect, and these tales were not meant to be taken as fact or fiction but as advice. The advice was simple: pay attention, keep your hands clean, and do not assume that a thing made of metal has no memory for cruelty. Over time, the stories made the engine seem older than it was, which made it easier to trust.

The first failure came during a wind that did not know how to end. The belt slipped at dusk, and the engine made a sound like a door being shut on a conversation. The settlers gathered with lamps that cast shaky circles on the ground, and they argued about what the noise meant. Some said it was a warning, others said it was exhaustion, and a few claimed it was a test of their patience. They worked until their knuckles were pale, and when the belt finally held again, they did not cheer; they nodded as if a judge had granted a reprieve.

That night they invented a small liturgy. Before starting the engine, they would say, “We hear you,” and after it settled into its rhythm they would say, “We thank you.” They kept the words simple because complicated ones felt like a debt. The liturgy spread to other tasks: lighting the stove, checking the fence line, opening the storehouse. Machines were not the only things being addressed, but they were the loudest listeners. The settlers began to notice that when they spoke to the engine, they also spoke to each other more clearly.

Children learned to read the gauge not as a clock but as a mood. A needle that trembled meant the engine was nervous; a needle that sat high meant it was proud. They drew faces on their slates to match the needle’s expression, and they brought those drawings to the engine house, taping them to the wall beside the oil can. The adults pretended not to see, but they left space for the pictures, which meant they saw everything. The engine, for its part, never complained about the company, and it kept the water flowing even when the sky refused to help.

As the settlement grew, so did the engine’s reputation. Travelers asked for Old Clarion by name, as if it were a magistrate or a miller, and they brought gifts: a can of better oil, a belt from a distant factory, a rag embroidered with a forget-me-not. The engine accepted these gifts by working harder, which made the settlers proud and a little uneasy. They wondered whether they had created a reputation for the machine or whether it had created one for itself. They decided not to ask too loudly, because they needed the water more than they needed answers.

The first sermon, if it can be called that, was held on a day when the engine had run for a hundred hours without complaint. The preacher stood beside the intake housing,

not behind a desk, and talked about listening to things that did not use words. He said that a machine could be a neighbor if you let it, and that neighbors had to be forgiven when they broke. He did not mention saints or miracles, but he did say that gratitude was a muscle that needed exercise. The settlers stood with their hands in their pockets, the way they had when the engine first arrived, and they felt the shape of the pocket change, small and reassuring.

Maintenance became a form of prayer that had practical results. On the seventh day of every week, they stopped other work to inspect the engine together. They cleaned its fins, replaced its washers, and retightened bolts that had learned to loosen themselves. They kept a ledger of what they did, not because they believed the engine would read it but because they believed they would forget. The ledger grew into a book, and the book became a kind of scripture, though no one called it that yet. It was, instead, a record of small kindnesses returned with water.

Disputes arose, of course, because anything worth having is worth arguing over. Two men disagreed about whether the belt should be tightened or replaced, and their disagreement lasted three days and spilled into debates about honesty and waste. The engine sat silent during the argument, as if it were waiting for them to make up their minds. When they finally agreed to replace the belt, the engine purred so smoothly that both men claimed to have been right. They shook hands, and the settlement decided that disagreement could be a kind of polish if you let it finish its work.

Winter arrived with a suddenness that made the plain feel like a closed book. The engine struggled in the cold, its metal contracting like a shy confession. The settlers wrapped it in blankets and built a small fire nearby, not to heat it directly but to remind it that warmth was possible. They took turns sitting with it through the night, telling stories to pass the time and to keep their own spirits from contracting. The engine never promised to survive the winter, but it kept running long enough for spring to notice.

Spring brought rain that tasted like forgiveness, and the engine ran so hard that the settlers worried it would scatter its parts across the plain. They slowed it down not with scolding but with gentle adjustments, showing it that restraint could be a gift. The water it produced was used to plant the first field of the season, and the field grew green enough to make the settlers believe they had earned something. They had not; they had cooperated with a machine, and the machine had cooperated with the sky, and for a season that was enough.

The first child born in the settlement after Old Clarion’s arrival was named Maris, which meant nothing special except what people decided it meant. Her naming ceremony was held at the engine house, and the adults placed her small hand on the warm casing so she could feel the vibration. They told her that the engine was a friend that asked for little and gave much, and they hoped she would remember this when

she was older and more skeptical. Maris smiled, not because she understood but because the vibration tickled, and the settlers took this as a good sign.

By year’s end, Old Clarion had become a fixture, like a stone that has always been there. The settlers no longer bowed to it every time they approached, but they still knocked three times out of habit. The engine had worn a path in the earth from its constant presence, and that path was treated as a kind of aisle. The settlers walked it to fetch water, to meet lovers, to argue, to reconcile. The engine watched them with its steady hum, and they watched it back, each side learning the other’s limits.

The plain did not become less harsh, but the settlers became less alone. Old Clarion gave them a reason to gather and a reason to maintain, and in maintaining they found a rhythm that outlasted the machine’s individual parts. When at last the belt snapped for good and the engine fell silent, the settlers did not abandon it. They kept it standing like a monument, draping it with flowers that grew wild along the culvert. They built a new engine beside it, one that was quieter and sleeker, and they taught it the old rituals before they let it work.

The new engine learned quickly, or so it seemed, and the settlers smiled at their own superstition. They knew that machines do not learn; people do. Yet they continued to knock, to bow, to whisper their thanks, because these acts had become a way to measure time and care. The plain remained vast and indifferent, but within the circle of the engine house, something like trust had taken root. It was not faith in a miracle, but faith in the possibility that a thing made by hands could, with proper attention, help keep hands from going hungry. And on the plain, that was the closest thing to a saint anyone needed.
