

“Doot!” the console piped.

Bleary eyed, the operator raised his head from where it had been resting on the table.

“What is it?” he protested, being quite annoyed by not being allowed to rest. It seemed the computer just knew when a body needed rest the most, and refused to cooperate, Marc thought.

Of course, the console didn't reply — other than to spit out another belligerent “Doot!” He read the message on the console.

“Oh, maayan!” Marc moaned, “load check agaaain?”

“Tapes! Blasted sequential file, error prone, ditt persnickerty, cartridge damned dirty data tapes!” Marc thought. He thought several other strings of words as he walked out onto the machine room floor to correct the situation. Complaining came easily at 02:30 AM.

“You would think after all the technological advancement in the last one hundred years, they would have done away with data storage on sequential tape media!” His mind continued, “And then, there's Graveyard Shift! What a God forsaken time of day — or night — to have to work! Ugggh!” Marc was not pleased to be working at night, it would seem.

“And these ‘Super-Duper-Double-Fantastic-ass-blasted-gowel-dourned-Tape-Auto-Loaders don't work worth a pitt! Just as well go back to the days of the manual loading — using real people! For all the times these farging things mess up, I end up loading the peeccking things myself anyway!”

That was an exaggeration, and Marc knew it, as he walked down the matrix of the four thousand ninety six tape autoloading devices, each of which serviced four tape drive units — a thousand tapes per autoload device. Quite the amazing system, if taken in the light of day. As it was, early AM, Marc just didn't see it quite that way. Each time one of the more than sixteen million tapes

had a problem, it was a major annoyance. Marc's favorite thought of comfort was that, with all these machines and mechanization, it still took a real person to keep them running properly.

"Let's see, row able-dog, device two-fox. Here it is. What's the matter, your fingers getting slippery? You don't even have a tape in your silly claw!" He hit 'reset' and issued the tape request manually from the control panel. The drive responded normally, and loaded the tape.

Marc looked in disgust, "You just wanted to make me work didn't you? You're jealous 'cause I don't have to be 'online' all the time."

On his way back to the console room, he took a glance at the machine room terminal and noticed another autoloader was experiencing a load check.

"How kind," he thought, "for you to mess up while I'm on the floor! I give you my sincerest gratitude device baker-charley-able-four."

Unfortunately, Marc hadn't yet realized that device BCA4 was on the other side of the machine room floor. About one hundred and fifty meters from where he was standing, and approximately two hundred meters from the console room. By the time Marc had traversed the maze of machines, and reached the device, he was no longer giving thanks to the autoloader, but threatening its life — except that it didn't have one.

"Cheese-us!" he fumed. "Who in the sam-hell put you way out here?" It was in the perfectly logical location based on its numerical assignment. "This stupid thing is nearly in the Direct Access Storage Room!"

The Direct Access Storage Room, or DASD room, as it was known, was a virtual refrigerator (no pun intended). It was kept cooler than the tape section because the devices performed better in the cold air. The Central Processor Room was kept even colder — below freezing — for the same reason.

"I almost need to go back and get my coat!" Marc exclaimed. "So, Mister, what's your problem?"

As he examined the device, he found the autoloader had missed the cartridge port, and had smashed the tape cartridge into the side of the tape drive. Needless to say, the cartridge was ruined.

"You stupid machine! What happened to your touch sensitivity?"

Marc thought about kicking the side of it, but knew quite well it had no feelings, and that his foot did. He had learned that lesson some time ago.

The usual procedure was to log the damaged tape and replace it with a scratch tape. By logging the tape, the programmers and designers could tell just what data had to be re-created to replace the information on the destroyed tape.

"What a pain!"

Marc — well let's just say — wasn't always the most conscientious computer operator all the time. He pitched the tape — no log. "Probably was a scratch tape anyway."

He finally returned to the console room, where it was considerably warmer than the machine room tape floor. He had just started to settle down into a relaxed state where the eyes are just closed, but you think you're still alert, except that your mind is starting to adventure into another area of consciousness. He began to dream

"Mr. Williams, wake up!!" Oh no! Marc thought. It was H. G., the BOSS.

"I want you to meet your new replacement: Craig-X-1. I know you'll be as impressed with him as I am. He never grows tired, and can spot problems almost before they start. Doesn't need to eat, or go to relieve himself! Just replace his rechargeable battery pack once a day with an alternate pack, and he's ready to go for another twenty four hours."

Marc just sat there staring in disbelief. "This couldn't be for real," he thought, "could it?"

His boss continued, "And, you'll have to admit, he looks quite human! Nothing to annoy the executives in his appearance. Always looks sharp in his freshly pressed shirts and suit. Oh, you can turn in your badge as you leave your shift this morning. Yes, with these units, we'll be replacing all but the very essential people — I mean those who think for a living!"

Marc felt himself begin to boil. He just stared at H. G. and thought, "So, you think you can take humans out of the work place, do you? What will you do when they make a model that can do your job?" he sneered to himself. "It certainly doesn't take much thinking to fill your shoes! Perfect imbecile!"

"Doot!" inserted the console.

He jerked to wakefulness. "What is it now?" he demanded. He looked quickly around the room. "Whew!! It was just a dream! What a dream, though," he thought. "But they'll never be able to make a machine that can take variable information like this, inspect the situation, and know just what to do."

Marc read the message: 'IEH14326I - MISSING INTERRUPT HANDLER, INTERFACE CONTROL CHECK.' 'IEH14327I - DEVICE FF3A TAKEN OFFLINE BY SYSTEM - CONTACT SERVICE REPRESENTATIVE'.

In a way, he was glad this happened. He could call Dick Navarre, the graveyard service representative for IDM/IDC. Marc always enjoyed the evening more when someone was present, and Dick was one of the most interesting people Marc had ever met. Navarre had worked for IDM most of his life. Always seemed to have such a pleasant attitude toward life, even at oh-three-hundred.

Mark quickly placed the service call. This was the only thing he could think of that was good about the night shift. Things were different on the day shift as far as the service rep's went. They were entirely businesslike. Not all

that friendly, and never got personal with anyone. Oh, they were pleasant enough, but they just didn't seem real. There was something uncanny about them. All in their same starched white shirts, and "power ties," dark slacks, sometimes even suspenders! Never had a hair out of place. "Gad," he thought, "they all had those communicators that went "Blee-de-blee-de-bleep!" He had to give a little chuckle at the thought. You could always know when one was near. Now that Marc's mind was on the thought, the idea suddenly came to him that they were all young, appeared to be not older than thirty two, and they all wore the same smile. It was enough to make you sick!

"Where did they find them?" he queried to himself.

One of Marc's lady friends commented once that she thought he ought to dress like that. He had replied it would take more money than he was making here to be able to afford such an affluent wardrobe.

It even seemed they never made a mistake, too! I guess that's why IDM hired them. Who wouldn't want their employees to give the companies they serviced the impression they were infallible. He could just imagine some top executive in BIG BLUE TOWER saying, "It's the air of confidence!"

Well, Dick didn't give that impression, but he was one damn good customer service rep! Why, Marc would have wagered on Ol' Navarre against one of those stiff boys any day of the week!

Just then, the security buzzer sounded. Marc checked the video monitor, saw it was Navarre, and passed him on through. "All right!" he thought, "Dick'll have that box fixed in no time, and he'll probably spend an hour chatting about the good old days!"

Navarre walked into the room, without the usual smile he wore.

"What's the problem tonight, Marc?" he said, none too cheerfully.

“Missing interrupt handler, interface control check on FF3A. But what’s wrong with you? Somebody die or somethin’?”

“Well Marc, the company’s been leaning hard on my service record lately. I think they’re trying to get me to quit, or retire or something. I mean, I am sixty five. I just don’t know what I’d do though, if I couldn’t work. Probably die within three weeks of termination.”

Marc’s mouth had dropped, and was still open with no sound coming out. Navarre quipped, “Tryin’ to catch flies? Ought to take you out to my stables, you could catch some there!”

Dick had often talked of his horses, though Marc had thought it a rather difficult story to swallow. No one raised Aanimals any more! Marc even thought it might be against the law or something, so he had never encouraged Dick to talk about it. Yet, there was something about it, perverse as it might be, that Marc found intriguing. He thought he’d love to ride, or even own a horse some day like the western range traders with their laser guns holstered at their sides, and shooting-out the Porsche Baron Bandits! (Too many flicks?)

“What’s wrong with your service record? You’re always right on the money, and aren’t bad with the time it takes to replace the parts either!”

“Why, remember the time, you told me about, back in ‘85 when there was that disabled spin loop? Only ninety seconds to diagnose the problem before IML became required. You diagnosed the problem in thirty seconds, hit hard stop, went out and replaced the failing card, came back in, and started the system with seventeen seconds to spare! System never knew what hit it!” Marc was filled with pride in his recounting of the story.

“Well, Marc, I didn’t quite do that all by myself actually,” Dick said with his eyes downcast as his voice trailed off. “Anyway, I am slowing up some, and those young fellas just seem to have a knack I can’t explain. They diagnose

instantly, and are never wrong. They repair with such skill, I can't tell their repair work from factory install! And then, I mean, look at me! I've been placed on permanent night shift until I do retire, because the corporation wants to give their best image during the day, when all the big shots are around."

"Something isn't right!" thought Marc.

"It isn't fair!" he shouted emphatically, as he snapped around to face Dick.

"Oh, hey, Marc, I've got to get to work — fox-fox-three-able, you said? Right!" Navarre moved out of the console room, disappeared behind the tape autoloaders, and into the DASD room.

Marc began to think, "What about these young guys?" Where were they coming from? Through the past several generations, job after job has been replaced by automation, even in computer operations! It now only takes one operator where in previous times it would have taken hundreds. But now, they were replacing the human jobs with "pretty people." Where were these perfect people coming from? It seems it's harder and harder for the average guy to get a decent job.

As Marc continued to ponder the point, he wondered how it could be possible so many perfect people were appearing everywhere. Each one of them content to perform whatever job is given to them. Even the store clerks seem so far above average — so perfect. It seems like the normal average collection of students are still going into the college training camps. His brother had gone to one, and when he had finally come out, he was an entirely different person. He still looked like his brother, sort of. Marc continued to wonder, "It seems the graduates coming out of the college training camps are . . . not . . . quite . . ."

Just then, Dick Navarre came strolling back. Something was different. He looked younger. A sickly sweet smile was on his face, the kind Marc had

seen all too often before. Something was dead wrong. He was being escorted by two of the younger rep's. Where had they come from? And they were being followed by two more who were carrying a box — a DASD box — four by four by six.

Oh God, no . . . !