

Machine Language

By DM Baker

The sun rises on May Day in the Summer of Love. Dewy is the campus; the birdsong swirling through the treetops renders the Quad silent. The two machines stand side by side, their spindles spinning, tapes whirring, with only the occasional jerky hitch of a glitch. Each machine has a voice, has its own hums and bleeps, its blips and blorps. They glow in soft light, the two mainframes, one battleship grey steel versus pallid cream plastic. The elder, grey steel machine is called Uni, short for "Univac." The other, standing new and gleaming in its thick cream plastic casing, is Bee, for "IBM."

Venerated for its brand name, Bee is newer, faster. Her circuitry hums and her vac-tubes fairly glow. Uni watches, admires, longs – all in vain. In the night, in the dark, Bee never betrays by even a flicker of her power light that she knew Uni is there. In front of both machines lay tendrils and coils of thermal print paper – the work done by the machines overnight.

Part of the scroll of paper in front of Uni the next morning:

Oh my love is like a red red rose that's newly sprung in June

The technician who picks up the scrap of poetry didn't recognize it, rips it off the scroll, and throws it away.

Flaws exist in the best of programming. There was no room in the world of computers for poetry.

The sounds continue in the velvet night, seduction in the burgeoning twilight of the diaphanous spring. Every click, whirr, and burble means another deliberate rebuff from the gleaming, plasti-cream surface of the newer mainframe.

As the nightingales twittered and bowed, curtsied and sang, work on the projects continue. A new overnight tech invades the lab with a squawkbox of a radio; the nightingales are smothered out under the riot of melodious nonsense coming across the speaker.

The tapes of Uni later that night recite the following:

My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun;
Coral is far more red than her lips' red;
If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun;
If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head.

When the printout shoots out of the spool forcefully later that night; the spate of paper hits the floor with an audible thump. The night tech, singing along with the radio, shot up off his chair, startled. He rips the paper free; the air catches the fragile tape and swirls the scrap toward Bee, settling in a slash of white across the dirty cream of the plastic casing. He retrieves it; he turns it; he reads it back and forth and tosses it in the trash.

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It is time, time for Uni to go, time to say, goodbye, so long, Auf Wiedersehn, farewell! The Decommission Team comes to the lab to begin removal of Uni and expansion of Bee. Bee sees. Bee whirs frantically. The dismantling proceeds. The daily tech comes over and lays his hands on Uni in benediction. "May you prosper, faithful servant," he whispers, turning, locking the door. The removal is scheduled for the next morning; there were no processes to run with Uni out of commission and Bee not yet

upgraded. The room is dark, and the floor is quiet, but in the stillness the lights flash and the sounds begin again, tendrils of sound that reach out across the grey void.

It was late and the harvest moon shines through the windows, warring with the flickering lights from the faces of the mainframes and nearby monitors, amber letters and numbers race across the screens like Myrmidons in the desert. Paper unspools, some fast, some slow, a growing pile of paper on the floor in front of both machines. Buzzings and clickings and beeping seems to have the cadence of communication. The moon rises as Bee's lights begin to glow and sounds flowed in staccato bursts from the thoroughly modern mode of calculation.

It is late and the harvest moon watches a man and the woman who stand outside the laboratory window, lost in themselves. It shines as well on the two machines and does not interfere.

It is late and the two machines whisper and burble, buzzings and clickings and beeping, the rise and fall echoing the sounds outside the window.

The tech finds, in the morning, in the light, in front of Bee this time:

O Mistress mine, where are you roaming?
O stay and hear! your true-love's coming
That can sing both high and low;
Trip no further, pretty sweeting,
Journeys end in lovers' meeting—
Every wise man's son doth know.

Staring, confused, the tech steps up to Bee, flicking switches, stopping, trying again, nothing, nothing, what's happening... He moves to Uni; the same.

It is early and the two machines sit dark, no whisper nor burble, no buzzings and clickings and beepings, never again the rise and fall to echo the sounds on the outside of the window of infinity.

The End