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Off the Cuff

Automation We Love You Except When We Hate You

In the snack room below the University Main Library, a woman walked up to one of several vending machines, slid a quarter, a dime and a nickel into the vertical slot and pressed a big plastic button. A little bag of chips tipped off its shelf and tumbled down, stalling sideways inches above the chute. Several of us noticed the stuck bag.

The hapless buyer glanced briefly at the ceiling, sighed audibly, then hit the front of the machine four or five times. The bag didn't move.

The woman she had been sitting with joined her, and they discussed the situation in low voices. Taking turns they bumped against the massive steel and glass box, but the errant bag of chips sat there like a log jammed in a creek.

Their frustration, the loud banging and the humor of the situation soon infected the whole room. A tall man suggested slipping a ruler up inside. Someone offered a ruler, and they tried it. No way. The clever machine designer knew how cheaters think and put in a secondary metal flap that is blocked shut whenever you open the "push" flap at the bottom.

Oh, civilization. Oh, automation. We love you until you fail us, then we hate you with the vengeance of a slave in rebellion. We hate our dependence on technology, and we hate the conspiracy of unseen masters who set this all up just to trap the innocent and unwary.

I offered to help. We tried to tip the machine, going on the theory that if it dropped back to

the floor the shock might jar the bag loose. Three of us couldn't move it. I pulled a muscle in my back.

"Oh, I have an idea," the victim said. "I'll try getting the cookies right above. When they fall they should knock the chips down, too."

I went back to my seat and watched her weighing the odds, debating the probability of failure. She started to put her coins in, hesitated, and turned her back on the monster. Then she faced it with authority, pursed her lips and slipped in 55 cents for the cookies. The cookies fell, brushing right past the jammed bag of chips without moving it.

A delicate lady in faded jeans stepped up. "This has happened to me before," she announced with the voice of experience. "Here's what you do." She began a steady vibrating beat on the face of the machine with the heel of her hand. She kept it going, and slowly the bag began to slide. "You just have to keep this up. Keep hitting it."

The bag slipped another inch. She kept the vibrations going. Then the bag just broke loose and fell free. Shouts of joy went up. A feeling of triumph filled the room.

Victory to the people.

— BARBARA SHAW



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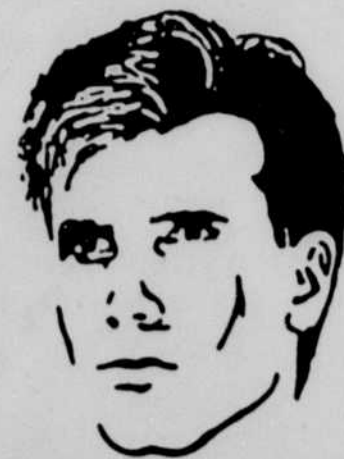
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