

INSIDIOUS OBSESS\$ION

BY BEVERLY BROWN

In these trying times, we Americans face a daily assault on our way of life that few of us see. There is, however, hardly a challenge to our hard-won freedoms more insidious than the addiction that has quietly, menacingly enmeshed itself into the very fabric of our spiritual and economic lives.

In our haste to identify and succor our addicted children, celebrities and professional athletes, we have carelessly overlooked an important and dangerous subgroup of addicts. Yes, I am talking about vending machines; those harmless looking, uninteresting machines we take for granted every single day of our lives.

As we basked in the warm sun of the early sixties, we could not have foreseen the tragic consequences of our great blunder of 1964. Until that fateful year vending machines were loyal, if simple metal boxes whose sole aim was to please their human employers. That was when aluminum came onto the scene and the sun went down.

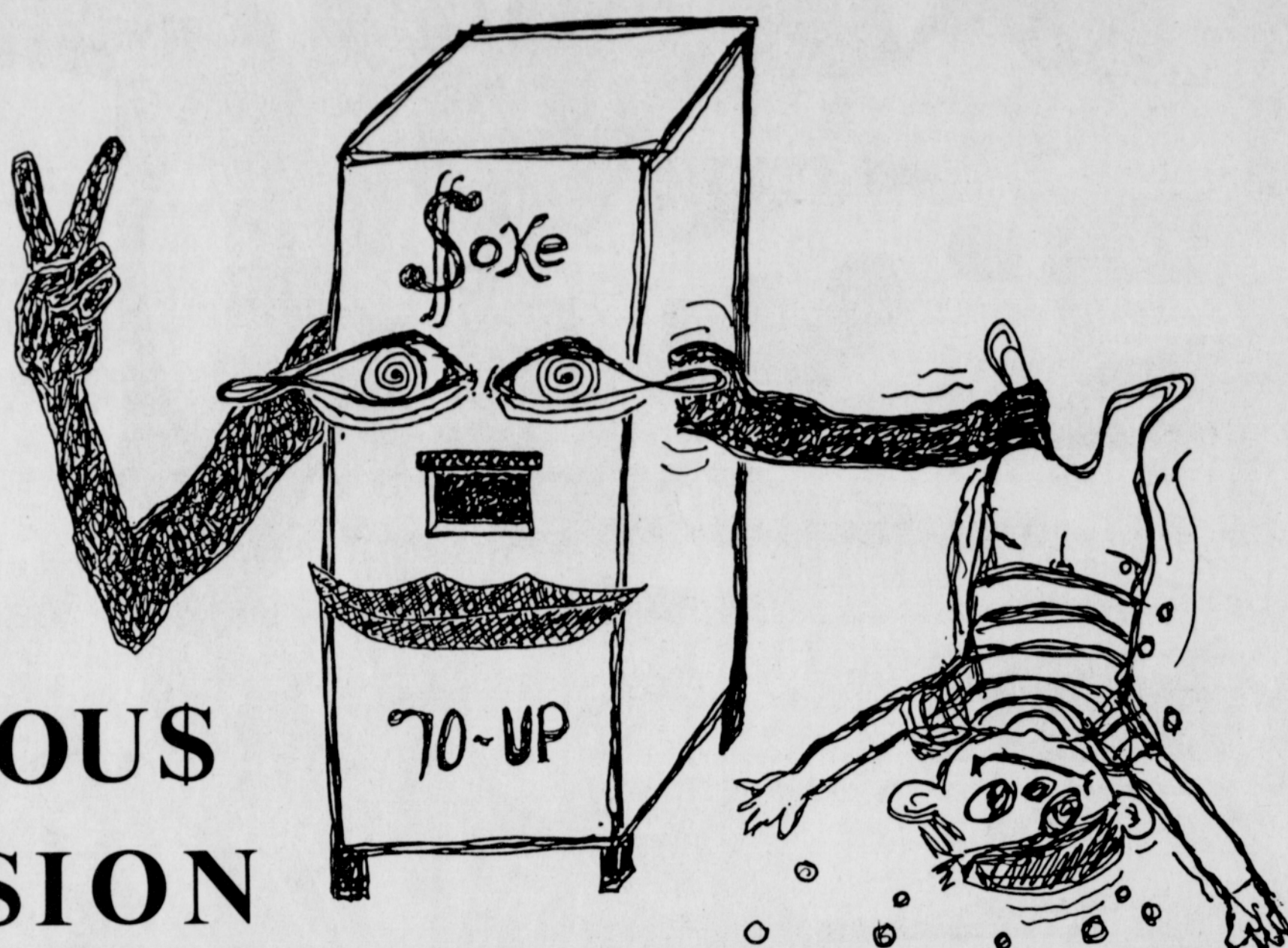
On May 1, 1963, the Moon Commission, established to study the possible side-effects of light metal consumption on vending machines, aired its findings on aluminum to representatives of the Treasury Department and a panel of company scientists from MFM (Metal For Money) Corporation, an inflation activist group and civilian contractors for the proposed switch to mostly aluminum coin. Here is a brief summary of what took place on that fateful day:

The Moon Commission's report contained disturbing news about the possible side effects of excessive aluminum consumption on the functioning of the delivery chutes and, more dramatically, on the change-return mechanisms of vending machines. In a study of 15,000 machines of various makes and models over a period of three months, there was a 13% decrease in the ability to give back correct change in virtually every machine tested.* The panel was also shown a video in which a single vending machine was locked in a small room with two levers and a chute. Every time the white lever was pressed, Three-in-One oil flowed down the chute, giving the machine a much needed lube job. When the red lever was pressed, aluminum plugs would pour into the change box (the slot having been surgically removed). The machine, left to its own devices, continued to press the red lever to get the aluminum until it rusted solid from lack of oil.* After viewing the film, this reporter was shocked. The panel, however, rejected the findings of the Moon Commission as having failed to provide a truly random sampling of a large and heterogeneous vending machine population. They also concluded that failure to strictly adhere to double-blind testing procedures rendered their experiment useless to the general scientific community.*

The panel reluctantly conceded one point in the authorization of "Correct Change Only" signs in the unlikely event that the "bad change factor" rose to 75%.* The rest is history.

NOTES:

1. Frances Moon, The Moon Commission: No More Pie in the Sky (San Francisco: Ghiradelli Press, 1964), p. 25.
2. Moon, Pie, pp. 72-75.
3. Art Tudeetu, Clank: "The MFM Report on the Vending Machine Scare"; MFM Journal, 13 (January, 1964), p. 86.
4. Tudeetu, Clank, p. 87.
5. Theodore Smothers, "Fire Down Below"; Hershey Vat (November 12, 1988), sec. 1, p. 2, col. 3.



DRAWING BY AGNES FIELD

Let us go back to 1964 for a moment and take a look at the coin consumption of that time. A candy bar cost a dime, gum was a nickel and cigarettes were approximately 30 cents. It is impossible to say exactly what amount of change is necessary to obtain these things today, as coin consumption rates are increasing geometrically even as this piece is being written.

These are harsh realities with which we must contend. The other day, I actually saw a vending machine take a Magic Marker in one of its levers and make a pathetic attempt to change the prices advertised on its window. Recently, in Hershey, Pennsylvania, a shop-keeper forgot to unplug his candy machine on leaving for the night. He returned the next morning to find a sign hung over the levers that read, "Candy \$2.50: Cheap!"* Thankfully, video arcade owners moved just in time by instigating their own non-addictive "token" program. Now in general use, this program at least relieves us of the need to worry about being bankrupted by our children before their twelfth birthdays. Nevertheless, the situation on the horizon is truly ominous.

The light grows dim. This "hell-bent-for-quarters" tyranny must be stopped! We must wrest control of our loose change back from these clattering coin-heads before it is too late! Do you want your child to be turned upside-down and shaken by an unruly gang of candy machines because his contribution to their obsession wasn't enough for them? I think not. And what's going to happen to us when they put their windows together and figure out how much we'll pay for cigarettes? This madness must not be allowed to continue!

As we see the storm clouds gathering on the horizon we may well ask ourselves, "Well, what are we supposed to do about it, anyway?" What indeed! In these drastic times, only drastic measures can save these hopelessly enslaved brainchildren of our technological ramblings. We must not hesitate to turn them over to proper authorities so they can get the help they so desperately need. It is our duty to rip them out of the walls, one by one if necessary, and drag them banging and clanking to the nearest VMRC (Vending Machine Reconditioning Center) for ten days of behavior modification and a couple of convenient two-day follow-ups. VMRC has a 90% success rate, and most machines respond quite well to this comprehensive treatment.

In closing, I must say that the task before us is monumental. It remains to be seen whether a truly comprehensive program of loose-change addiction rehabilitation is possible, but we must try. We must spare no expense in irradiating this menace from our lives. Only then will we finally be free to concentrate on the more pressing issues of our times; like how to make a decent low-tar cigarette without all those pesky little holes in the filters.



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Beverly Brown lives in Astoria. She always uses correct change.

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