

The Cookie Monster

Vernor Vinge

*Man is "the time-binding animal."
But in the future, that simple
statement may take on meanings
that Korzybski never imagined. . . .*

"So how do you like the new job?"

Dixie Mae looked up from her keyboard and spotted a pimply face peering at her from over the cubicle partition.

"It beats flipping burgers, Victor," she said.

Victor bounced up so his whole face was visible. "Yeah? It's going to get old awfully fast."

Actually, Dixie Mae felt the same way. But doing customer support at Lotsa-Tech was a real job, a foot in the door at the biggest high-tech company in the world. "Gimme a break, Victor! This is our first day." Well, it was the first day not counting the six days of product familiarization classes. "If you can't take this, you've got the attention span of a cricket."

"That's a mark of intelligence, Dixie Mae. I'm smart enough to know what's not worth the attention of a first-rate creative mind."

Grr. "Then your first-rate creative mind is going to be out of its gourd by the end of the summer."

Victor smirked. "Good point." He thought a second, then continued more quietly, "But see, um, I'm doing this to get material for my column in the *Bruin*. You know, big headlines like 'The New Sweatshops' or 'Death by Boredom'. I haven't decided whether to play it for laughs or go for heavy social consciousness. In any case,"—he lowered his voice another notch—"I'm bailing out of here, um, by the end of next week, thus suffering only minimal brain damage from the whole sordid experience."

"And you're not seriously helping the customers at all, huh, Victor? Just giving them hilarious misdirections?"

Victor's eyebrows shot up. "I'll have you know I'm being articulate and seriously helpful . . . at least for another day or two." The weasel grin crawled back onto his face. "I won't start being Bastard Consultant from Hell till right before I quit."

That figures. Dixie Mae turned back to her keyboard. "Okay, Victor. Meantime, how about letting me do the job I'm being paid for?"

Silence. Angry, insulted silence? No, this was more a leering, undressing-you-with-my-eyes silence. But Dixie Mae did not look up. She could tolerate such silence as long as the leerer was out of arm's reach.

After a moment, there was the sound of Victor dropping back into his chair in the next cubicle.

Ol' Victor had been a pain in the neck from the get-go. He was slick with words; if he wanted to, he could explain things as good as anybody Dixie Mae had ever met. At the same time, he kept rubbing it in how educated he was and what a dead-end this customer support gig was. Mr. Johnson—the guy running the familiarization course—was a great teacher, but smart-ass Victor had tested the man's patience all week long. Yeah, Victor really didn't belong here, but not for the reasons he bragged about.

It took Dixie Mae almost an hour to finish off seven more queries. One took some research, being a really bizarre question about Voxalot for Norwegian. Okay, this job would get old after a few days, but there was a virtuous feeling in helping people. And from Mr. Johnson's

