

**PAM IN PORTLAND**

by Pamela Fry

"Do you realize how many trees you are helping to destroy?"

I looked up, startled, from my peaceful rinsing of our "good" glasses. For a moment I simply didn't get the connection.

"Why don't you use a teatowel to drain them?" my son demanded. "You're much too extravagant with those paper towels."

Trees. Paper. Of course. We use it endlessly and immoderately, as if there were no tomorrow. In our kitchens and bathrooms; in newspapers, magazines, and direct mail advertising. In all our stores. As casually as blowing our noses, which we also do with paper.

You would think that most of us had never even heard of the continuing threat of acid rain from across our borders, which is steadily destroying our lakes and rivers, as well as our trees. Especially in Eastern Canada, where more than 300,000 lakes are vulnerable, and some 14,000 have already been acidified. And how many of us really understand that the systematic destruction of the world's rain-forests is robbing our planet of one of its essential sources of sustenance and fertilization?

Heaven knows, we hear and read enough about such life-threatening tragedies as the "greenhouse effect," which is allowing many of the sun's most dangerous rays to reach us; the oil and chemical spills from factories and freight trains and trucks; the millions who are starving in Third World countries, as previously fertile soil turns into desert; the awful disasters at Three Mile Island in the U.S., Bhopal in India, and Chernobyl in Russia.

But doesn't it all seem a little remote? Frightening, of course, but not really close enough to touch our comfortable lives? Hard to boil it down to anything as ordinary as my using too many paper towels in my cosy kitchen. Even harder to accept the fact that we are not only allowing pollution to happen - we are contributing to it.

Because if we stop to think about it seriously, even for a moment, we are forced to realize that pollution is already a part of our everyday taken-for-granted existence. Food additives, for example, synthetic fibres, plastics, drugs and pesticides are all busily producing destructive chemical wastes as their inevitable by-products. Not to overlook garbage. Everyone's dull old garbage. In Canada alone we manage to produce 18.5 million tons of it per year. And, quite apart from bottles and tins, an awful lot of that is not biodegradable - it just doesn't go away. So-called disposable diapers are one of the worst examples - since they have proved to be completely un-disposable, and are accumulating in great nasty heaps up in our frozen north.

I, myself, have no excuse. I know that pollution poses as much of a threat to our planet as nuclear war. My first experience of its dire effects happened in London during the fifties. It was our third winter in England, and we'd already encountered quite a few fogs - "the big smoke" as Londoners called them. We were used to seeing the streets swirling with yellowish grey clouds, like something out of a Hitchcock movie. Rather romantic, really, reminding you of Dickens and Sherlock Holmes. Sinister but exciting.

But this fog, from the very beginning, was different. Even in the morning, it looked so grim that everyone kept their kids home from school. By evening, it had closed down on the city like a huge, dark hand. But, as it happened, we had plans to go out, and even further ominous warnings on the radio did nothing to discourage us. We were going with friends to hear an ex-patriot Russian talk about his novel. Near Victoria Station, on the other side of London. And off we went.

Well, we got there alright and found the hall where the writer was speaking. Apart from everything else, it was one of the dullest evenings I have ever spent. First came the writer - who spoke in Russian. Far too long. Then came the translator who, most drearily, went on even longer. The hall was cold and I watched as the fog came creeping in from every crevice until it hung above us like a threatening cloud. "It's getting worse" I thought, and for the first

time began to be slightly worried about driving back to Hampstead, where we lived. We were finally released, having absorbed nothing of value about Russian literature or anything else. Once outside, it was like walking into a thick, moist dark-yellow blanket. You literally could not see your hand in front of your face. To all intents and purposes, London had disappeared. My husband began to mutter about his car, which he'd left about two blocks away. But which way? No one was willing to try and find out. Not to worry, said one friend - a reckless Londoner who knew the city like the back of his hand. He would drive us home.

So into his car we climbed and off we went. It was fantastic. London had truly vanished. There were no houses, no streets, no traffic. Occasionally you would hear the plaintive honking of another lost and bewildered car. The fog had swallowed everything. Except for the occasional object which, with a kind of puckish humour, it had still left visible: the fretted ironwork of a gate, but with no house behind it; the fragment of a wall; a ghostly tree.

We soon found there was only one way we could progress. I was sitting beside the driver and I had to keep the door open, leaning slightly out and watching for the dim outline of what I could recognize as the sidewalk. "Curb!" I would

yell. Two feet, three feet, now I couldn't see it. Then again "Curb!" Inevitably, a couple of times we found we were travelling in circles. And every so often we would come across a scene which looked like something straight out of Dante's Inferno: a little knot of moving figures at a traffic intersection, lit by the wild glare of enormous acetylene torches, with a stranded red bus crosswise across the road and a scattering of orphan cars.

Shouts of encouragement and advice would greet us, setting us once more on our way. Occasionally, another desolate car would loom out of the darkness, honking its horn mournfully, like some creature from the deep. There was one terrifying moment when we found ourselves heading straight for the wall of Lord's Cricket Grounds. Our huge sigh of relief as we swung away was made even more heartfelt because we now knew we were almost home. It had taken something like three-and-a-half hours to make what would have normally been about a half-hour trip. When we finally reached our flat we were so exhausted and our throats were so raw that we lay down flat on the floor. It was really the only place we could breathe, because of course the fog had joined us inside.

Well, that fog lasted three full days. A number of people died, especially anyone who suffered from lung or bronchial problems. As I remember, it was also the final killer fog that started the big and successful clean-up of London's air.

It may seem an awfully long jump from life-threatening fogs in the ancient city of London to our trim little village, with its deliciously clean and sparkling air. But it isn't. My story is, quite deliberately, a cautionary tale.

In 1969, U-Thant, the then Secretary General of the United Nations, warned that we had perhaps ten years to resolve our global conflicts and to preserve and improve our environment. "...after that," he said, "the problems we face will have reached such staggering proportions that they will be beyond our capacity to control." In other words, we are living on borrowed time.

Does that mean it is already too late? I, personally, don't think so, providing each and every one of us is willing to radically change our attitude toward this world of ours. After all, it's the only one we've got.

So far, the whole history of industrialized society has reflected a greedy determination to exploit every natural resource until nothing is left. But we are a part of nature, and by trying to "conquer" it we are also destroying ourselves. To preserve this planet we must learn to give as well as grab - to protect as well as consume. And that means supporting and encouraging government conservation of our

environment, as well as putting pressure on all those profit-seekers, so they begin to produce goods that are safe as well as saleable. It is up to all of us - starting right in our own kitchens and backyards. Before it really is too late.



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