“WHAT ABOUT THE ENVIRONMENTAL COSTS?” my boss asked. My boss, Mr. Manning, always thinks about the environment. He’s Personal Paints’ Environmental Control Officer. Every company has one these days.

“That’s the beauty of it, Manning,” the salesman told him. (At least, I thought he was a salesman.) “Our system accommodates the scientific straight-through smokestack style that is the latest in environmental off-load technology. The fumes go directly into the atmosphere—”

“What? You want me to release the poisonous byproducts of Personal Paints directly into the atmosphere, and you say there are no environmental costs?”

“I didn’t say ‘no,’ I said ‘low,’ ” the salesman said (at least, he talked like a salesman). “As you know, pollution is legal these days as long as it is properly licensed and paid for. And the new administration has lowered the toxic particulate fee to twenty-five cents a ton. If you factor in your capital-improvements credit, and the discount you get if you buy the new smokestack from a U.S. company, you will save 39.8 percent the first year over your current smoke-scrubber system. Which doesn’t do all that damn much good anyway, judging from what I see out the window.”

“Hmmm! Well, you’ve got a point there. Are you getting all this down, Miss, Miss—”

“ ‘Mrs.,’ and it’s Robinson,” I said, trying to ignore Mr. Manning’s hand on my thigh. His sexual harassment permit (on file at the main office) didn’t cover actual genital contact, so I didn’t have to worry about him going much higher, thank God. “I’m writing it right here on my steno pad.” (Recycled paper; I do my part.)

“It’s all covered in the literature I gave you, anyway,” the salesman went on (I was still thinking he was a salesman). “Unrestricted atmospheric off-load is only one element of a total waste-management system that also includes unlimited solid debris dispersal and full-flow aquatic effluent elimination, all for one low EPA fee.”

(EPA! So he was a government man.)

“Well, now, you talk a good game,” Mr. Manning said. “But can you help with our solid-waste disposal crisis? We’re talking heaps of stuff here.”

“With our new accounting system, you no longer spend precious pennies trucking

trash all over creation looking for legal landfills," the Environmental Protection Agency representative (for that was what he was) said. "You pay a one-time pollution penalty fee and pile the shit in a big fucking heap on the poor side of town."

"I like that," said Mr. Manning. "But what about the sticky, stinky stuff? We have oodles of ordure that emit radioactive steam and drool dioxins directly into the groundwater. You're going to let us dump this anywhere we want?"

"No, we have a responsibility to protect the public," said the EPA rep. "The real stinky stuff, you dump it in the woods."

"I like that too," said Mr. Manning. "But what about the endangered species? You wouldn't believe the grief we get from the environmental do-gooders lately."

"Forget them," said the EPA rep. "If we listened to them, we'd be up to our assholes in owls."

"I thought it was eyebrows," I said.

"Don't worry your pretty little head about it," said Mr. Manning, his prowling paw pausing at the hem of my panties, where his permit ran out. "Just be sure you're getting all this down."

"It's all covered in the literature I gave you, anyway," said the EPA agent. "Since there are no endangered species left, the ES fees have been waived. That makes our direct environmental penalty payment plan even more attractive. According to the most conservative figures—"

While he droned on, I looked out the window. Mr. Manning's twenty-third floor office commanded a beautiful view of the river, looking with its gleaming oil slicks like Joseph's coat of many colors. (I read my Bible every day. Do you?)

The EPA rep was showing Mr. Manning a four-color picture of a thirty-six-inch pipe. "The beauty of a scientific straight-through system is that it never clogs and rarely backs up," he said. "The effluents are taxed once only and dumped directly into the river, which runs conveniently into the sea. It's like a pay toilet."

"This guy's a poet," mused Mr. Manning, running his hand along the crack that separated my buttocks. I tried to ignore him (jobs are scarce these days) and kept looking out the window. It was a gorgeous day. You could almost see the sky. The radioactive dump across town glowed warmly, reminding me of home. Since the dump was in my neighborhood, the high-Geiger penalty fees (we called it clickety-clink, or mutation money) had provided bonus burial benefits for five of my six children.

“Plus, it’s all plenty patriotic, since one hundred percent of the environmental penalty payment goes directly into the U.S. treasury, and not to some high-tech Jap clean-up scam,” the EPA rep said, winding up his spiel.

“I like that,” said Mr. Manning.

I sneaked a glance at my watch. My chronically underemployed husband, Big Bill, would be waiting impatiently for me to get home to cook supper for himself and our last remaining child, the hideously deformed, demented little cripple, Tiny Tim.

It was 4:59. Mr. Manning and the EPA rep were still working out the details of the quarterly pollution payment plan, which meant I would have to work late, whether I wanted to or not.

Of course, I would get paid overtime.

* * *

Finally, at 5:59, the papers were signed and I headed home. The stairs were crowded but the elevator was almost empty. Lots of people are afraid to take the elevator, after the terrifying incidents of the past few weeks, but just knowing the inspection certificate is on file in the building superintendent’s office (even if we’re not allowed to see it) is enough for me.

The expressway was bumper-to-bumper with the big-finned fifties replicas that are popular now that leaded gasoline is available again. It warmed my heart to think of all the ethyl-penalty bucks going into the HEW budget. I knew it was helping to pay for the remedial education of my deranged, learning-dislocated, double-dyslexic little boy, Tiny Tim.

I drove only half listening to the ads and to Howard Stern, who was back on the air (his station had apparently purchased another obscenity authorization). I was tired and didn’t really feel like listening, so I turned it down as low as it would go, longing for the day Big Bill and I could afford a car without a radio.

But it’s better to light a candle than curse the darkness, so I concentrated on the beauty of the many-colored cars crawling through the magenta-tinted air. The carbon penalty fees have certainly eased the tax burden on working wives like me.

Traffic was slowed almost to a crawl near the airport. At first I feared it was another crash (which can tie up the turnpike for hours), but it was only a set of landing gear that had worked loose and fallen onto the highway. This was happening more and more lately since the Federal Aeronautics Board had started selling maintenance waivers to the airlines to augment the FAB retirement fund.

I was glad to see the lights of our peaceful suburb, Middle Elm. My pleasure was spoiled a little (but only a little) by the cross burning in the park. It looked like the KKK had purchased another bias license—not as expensive as actual violence permits. The lynching last week must have cost them a pretty penny (if you can use the word “pretty” for such a grim event).

It was almost nine when I pulled into the drive. I knew I would be in trouble, so I hesitated at the door as long as I could—until I started to gag on the stench from our next-door neighbor’s pigpen. It’s a terrible odor, but what could we do? Mrs. Greene had paid her feces fees, and the money went to lower our property taxes, after all. Plus, her animals were not eaten but tortured to death for science, and I knew that these animal experiments were helping improve the quality of life of my terminally twisted, pus-encrusted, semi-psychotic son, Tiny Tim.

Barbara (I will not call her Babs!) was in her doorway, waving a rubber glove, but I didn’t wave back. Not to be snotty, but I hate it when ordinary people take on the airs of giant corporations.

“Where the hell you been, bitch!” Big Bill muttered. He took another swig of gin (ignoring the label, which said, WARNING, DRINKING MAKES SOME PEOPLE ACT UGLY). He grabbed my ass, and when I pulled away he made a fist like Ralph Cramden (don’t you love that old show?) and pointed not toward the Moon but toward his framed wife-beating authorization certificate hanging on the wall over the dinette table, next to our marriage license.

Ignoring his antics, I put the chicken in the oven, slamming the door quickly against the smell. I wondered how old it was but there was no way to tell. The expiration date was covered by an official USDA late-penalty override sticker, and it’s against the law to pull them off, like mattress tags.

Where was Tiny Tim? Just then I heard automatic-weapons fire (everybody has a permit these days) and he burst in the door; or rather, rolled in, his face all bloody and his wheelchair bent out of shape.

“Where have you been?” I asked. (As if I didn’t know! He’s had to travel through a bad neighborhood lately, ever since the town floated a bond issue to buy a permit allowing them to bypass the handicapped-access laws.)

“Got mugged,” he said, spitting broken teeth into one clawlike, grasping little hand.

“Who did it?” said his dad. “I’ll kill them!”

“They had their papers, Pop!” whined our bruised, battered, blubbering baby boy.

“They whipped them out and waved them in my face, and then it was whack whack whack!”

“Poor kid,” I said, trying not to look at him. Never a pretty child, he looked even worse than usual. Instead, I looked out the window at the sunset. They say sunsets are better now than ever, now that pollution is controlled. Certainly they are colorful as all Hell (if you’ll pardon my French)!

“God damn them every one,” Tiny Tim said, wrinkling what was left of his button nose. “What’s for supper, chicken again?”

And that’s the end of my story. If you don’t like it, fuck you. Please direct any complaints to the New York office of the National Writer’s Union, Plot Department, where my Climax Bypass Permit Number 5944 is on file.

Fee paid.