

The day began well enough. The sun shone down from an endlessly blue sky, there was no rain in the forecast. All the Pinawanians that were employed at the Atomic Nuclear Research Facility 19 kilometers down the only road from town had gone into work, creating the 15- minute rush hour which occurred twice a day. Their minds on coffee, children dropped off, whether they had turned the stove off and whatever it is that brilliant scientists think about. They drove through a dense forest on a narrow 2 lane road, without really registering it.

Such a lovely morning, I got bucket, water and newspaper together to do the job we all had to do after a long winter of snow and ice. The house had many windows on two floors, it would be a big job. My daughter who was four, was happily occupied with her best friend from across the street, playing some obscure game to which only they knew the rules. It required a large basement with movable furniture and lots of blankets and toys. We all knew when snack time would be, at which time we would all drop what we were doing and gather in the kitchen,

It took hours, but the windows sparkled inside and out. And then I saw it. A black cloud rose over the east side of town, a town of only 2000 residents, at least half of which were at the AECL facility. Anyone that lives in a forest, knows to fear a forest fire more than anything. Most of the volunteer fire fighters were also at the AECL facility. The Fire Chief was in town because his job was administrator at the small hospital. Soon phones began to ring, the black smoke was followed by tall red flames. The alarm was raised at AECL. Employees were told to leave, but not to try to get to town. The town was where their houses and children were. They got into their vehicles and tried to race, bumper to bumper through the smoke and flames which had by now jumped the road, to their families.

There were two elementary schools in the town, one on the side where the fire was raging. The principals told the children to go home. By then the fire was fast approaching the eastside school. Those town residents who were at home, retirees, mothers, store employees had quickly taken out hoses and shovels. To their horror, masses of small children were following their usual route home from school, which took them straight into the path of the fire. A great deal of time was lost getting them out of harm's way. They were smokey and terrified.

The Fire Chief gathered as many of his crew as he could as they arrived in town and took the equipment to the fire.

The town supervisor had immediately called the Province for help. It had been a dry spring and the water bombers had been in demand. The cry for help was at first not acted on quickly, but as the flames spread the director of the nuclear facility called the Premier at his office, and in words we can only imagine explained what would happen if a fire burned into the nuclear reactor. Water bombers and bucket helicopters were soon on their way.

In the meantime, I was watching black ash accumulating on my nice clean windows, but there wasn't much time to think about it. Crying children were going by and I knew their parents weren't home. I brought them in and posted them at the big front window to watch for the arrival of their mother and father from work. The windows were getting blacker, this was very disturbing and gave me something to grumble about as I made sandwiches and put together canteens of water for those fighting the fire from the ground. I watched huge pine boughs floating through the superheated air and landing in my yard. It was tempting to take the garden hose out to douse them but knew that all the water pressure was needed by the firefighters. Time ticked by slowly.

The heavy drone of the water bombers was music to our ears. Watching them fly low over the river to load up and then drop the water on the flames was like watching a brilliantly choreographed ballet. The AECL facility was secured first. Soon the bucket helicopters joined in, dropping their swinging buckets of water on burning yards, boats and sheds. The helicopters put out the fire burning up the playground behind the school and soaked the school to provide some protection from catching fire.

The neighbor's children raced out to their parents as soon as their car appeared. We all watched the drama taking place in the darkened sky. One neighbor was taking pictures. The Mounties wife packed her car with their photo albums, insurance papers and her small printing press. She was the only news editor/reporter/printer in town, and she was getting out. Until I pointed out that she would have to drive through the flames. There was the option of hijacking a boat at the marina, but none of us was too sure how to hotwire a boat.

Terrified wildlife raced through town. We just stayed out of the way.

With the heroic assistance of the bomber and helicopter pilots, the people of town, old, young, in shape or not, the fire was controlled and eventually put out. For days the volunteer firefighters stayed vigilant, ready to put out hot spots. The town had a smokey smell for weeks, the beautiful trees were blackened corpses on the ground, but the town and the nuclear facility had been saved.

There was a lot of finger pointing. Meetings were held to make detailed plans on how to react in an emergency. And I went back to washing windows.