

Power

My local electrical utility will stop at nothing to get me to conserve energy. In today's mail was a report comparing my energy usage last summer to that of my neighbors. The amount of kilowatt hours I burned up is evidently in stark contrast to the anemic consumption by other families up and down my street. Not only was my flagrant devil-may-care electrical usage exposed by a comparison to the entire town, but also to those people near me who the utility company calls my Efficient Neighbors.

All of this is confidential, according to the power company, but I can guess the identity of most of my Efficient Neighbors because it's quite easy to pick them out. They have sweat stains on just about all of their summer clothing, under their arms and sometimes elsewhere. These are the folks you sometimes see sleeping out on their porches on hot and sticky August nights. One ex-sailor sleeps out on his garage roof as if it were the deck of an aircraft carrier.

Rather than run their air conditioning, Efficient Neighbors choose instead to tough it out and find their cool elsewhere while the rest of us are safely tucked in our beds with a blanket over us, the air conditioning turned up to high. Now that the Power Company has exposed these poor folks as conservationists, I no longer worry if their A.C. is off because of lost jobs or other financial setbacks.

My Efficient Neighbors turn their heat down in the winter and sit around watching TV while wearing those Obi-Wan Kenobi robes as seen on TV, the kind in which you can hold and sip a Hot Chocolate while keeping your hands covered if you're careful. You can bring the cup inside the robe if you like danger, but that voids the warranty. These same neighbors achieve gasoline efficiency by looking for routes to the Organic Store that are mostly downhill. Sure, they have to drive back home uphill, but to save fuel they make

the kids get out and walk.

The Power Company didn't announce a name for my kind of power glutton. Maybe they would call me an Energy Abuser. I leave lights on in the cellar because I'm planning to go right back down as soon as I grab another cup of coffee from the pot I keep running continuously. I turn the heat and the air conditioning up to high, not usually at the same time, and let my engine idle in the driveway to warm the car up before taking off by flooring the accelerator. I throw away batteries before they become exhausted just to be sure my flashlight never starts to go dim and I've been known to fall asleep in front of the TV late at night and let it burn up the kilowatt hours until dawn.

Just as you can pick out the nerdy Efficient Neighbors by their sweat and tears, we Energy Abusers are also apparent to all but the most casual observer. Usually our homes are well lit by incandescent bulbs and our eyes are not all squinty from trying to read in dim light or the yellow glare of those new bulbs that look like soft ice cream cones. We leave the porch light burning all evening because our kids will be coming home at eleven. And if we just stopped by your house to drop something off, we left the car running in the driveway. Our utility bills are so high the power company has considered hand delivering them.

"We're here to help you save," says their folksy envelope stuffer. "We're not a company of businessmen," it goes on, "we're a company of conservationists!" That is enough to make one reach for the Dramamine. Their plan calls for embarrassing me into using less power while they appeal to the State Utilities Commission to raise rates to "help customers to conserve." Then they can do less work to produce less power and make more money. Maybe their company motto should be, "This isn't a business, it's a screw job."

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