Like so many terrible things, the dark cloud seemed to appear out of nowhere. It swept over London, England—black and poisonous. It brought terror and death. It would kill 12,000 people.

This was not a monster from a nightmare, an F5 tornado, or an alien spaceship. This terrifying killer was air—a massive cloud of toxic, polluted air. For five days, it blanketed London, causing fear, panic, and death. It became known as the Killer Smog of 1952, and it is one of the deadliest environmental disasters in history.

Brian Bone was 9 years old when the killer smog struck, on December 5, 1952. It was a quiet day, and Brian was at home with his parents and 15-year-old brother, Hugh. When Brian opened the back door to let out his dog, Tarzan, he noticed that the morning was damp and smoky.
But that wasn’t unusual for London at that time of year. The German shepherd trotted into the fenced-in backyard, and Brian shut the door and went about his day.

It was only later, when Brian went to call the dog in, that he realized something was horribly wrong.

The hazy morning had turned midnight black. The air had a sharp smell—a mixture of chemicals and rotten eggs. Brian and his parents called for Tarzan, but the dog had escaped through a hole in the fence. Normally, the shepherd would have been able to sniff his way home. But even a dog’s powerful sniffing ability was no match for the smothering smog. For hours the family searched the neighborhood, braving the darkness as they called for Tarzan. But the dog remained hopelessly lost.

Across London, millions of people had been plunged into darkness. Buses screeched to a halt. Trains stopped on their tracks. Cars crashed. People stumbled along the streets, unable to find their way home. A few got so lost they fell into the Thames River and drowned. Being indoors was no escape. The black air crept under doors and through keyholes, filling up homes and offices and hospitals.

What was happening?

**Pea-Soup Smog**

For centuries, London had been known for its fog, a swirling white mist that wrapped itself around the city on chilly days. The fog was as much a part of London as the Big Ben clock and Buckingham Palace. It had appeared in countless paintings and inspired celebrated poems and haunting ghost stories.

True, it made the city gloomy at times. But it was natural and harmless. Fog is simply microscopic drops of water trapped in the air.

By the 1800s, however, as the city grew more crowded and modern, it wasn’t only fog that swirled in London’s air. It was pollution from factory smokestacks and millions of home chimneys. Much of this pollution came from burning coal, which produced an especially sooty and oily smoke. On foggy days, this dirty smoke would stick to the tiny drops of water in the air—imagine trillions of tiny bubbles slathered with dirty oil and filling up every inch of the air.

In 1905, this dark and dirty fog got an official name: smog.

By then, smog was already a problem in London. It was especially bad on cold winter days. When the temperature dropped, people burned more coal to keep warm. Smoke belching out of 12 million home chimneys created hideously green “pea-soup” smog. Air pollution wasn’t a problem just in London. The early 1900s was a time of growth for cities all over Europe—and the United States. Smog from factories and steel mills blanketed American cities like Pittsburgh and Cleveland. It turned cities ugly and smelled terrible. Kids playing outdoors would come home with blackened clothes, their lashes and eyebrows coated with black slime that could be removed only with strong detergent.

Most people assumed that nothing could be done to make the air cleaner. Coal was the cheapest way to heat a home, and most Londoners couldn’t afford cleaner heating systems. The owners of factories and power plants insisted that reducing pollution would be too expensive. And what would happen if they had to close their factories? Millions of people would lose their jobs.

Smog, it seemed, was just a fact of modern city life.
A True Disaster

What few people understood at the time was that smog wasn’t just dark and smelly. It was also dangerous to breathe. It contained toxic chemicals and particulates—specks of unburned coal. As Brian and his family searched outside for Tarzan, their lungs filled with poison.

Even before scientists fully understood exactly how smog damages the body, there were signs that it was harmful. On pea-soup smog days in London, schoolkids would be hunched over their desks, wheezing and hacking as they tried to work. Elderly people would collapse in the streets. Emergency rooms routinely filled with patients showing signs of smog-related lung problems, like asthma and pneumonia.

Still, decades went by and government leaders took few steps to reduce air pollution.

But then came the smog of 1952.

This smog was different from others before, more extreme and long lasting. The unusually cold weather meant that people were burning more coal than usual to stay warm. There was no wind, nothing to clear away the smog.

So day after day, London remained dark. Schools stayed closed. Workers couldn’t get to their jobs. Even funerals were canceled; grieving relatives couldn’t drive from churches to cemeteries to bury their loved ones.

By day three of the fog, there was some good news at the Bone house: Tarzan had somehow made his way home. But Brian couldn’t do much celebrating, because he was sick in bed with a burning, painful cough. He felt as though the smog itself was trapped inside his chest.

All around London, others were getting sick—thousands and thousands of people. At first, most doctors believed that people were suffering from the flu or other typical winter illnesses. Even scientists did not immediately make a direct connection between the smog and the growing number of coughing, wheezing people staggering into hospitals.

But soon it became clear that London was in the grips of a true disaster. The smog wasn’t just making people sick. It was killing them.

By the time the smog finally cleared on the fifth day, more than 4,000 people had died. In the coming months, roughly 8,000 more would die from the lung damage they had suffered.

New Laws for Cleaner Air

The Killer Smog of 1952 changed the way people thought about air pollution. For the first time, there could be no doubt that smog wasn’t simply ugly and smelly—it was deadly. Over the next three years, the British government developed a new law designed to make air cleaner. Polluting factories were moved outside the city. The government helped people pay for cleaner heating systems that didn’t rely on dirty coal.

America followed with clean-air laws of its own. In 1970, the American Clean Air Act imposed stricter laws on factories and other sources of pollution.

Since then, there have been no killer smogs in England or America. But new sources of pollution, mainly cars, make dirty air a major problem in many areas of both countries.

And smog remains a truly deadly problem around the world. Beijing, China, and New Delhi, India, are just two of dozens of cities frequently shrouded in pea-soup smogs caused by factories, burning coal, and car exhaust.

According to the World Health Organization, air pollution is the world’s most dangerous environmental problem. In 2012, about 7 million people died from exposure to dirty air. Millions more suffer from pollution-related health problems like asthma.

Few understand the dangers of pollution better than survivors of the killer smog, people like Brian Bone.

Happily, Brian recovered from his illness. But throughout his life, he has suffered from lung problems that may have been caused by the smog.

Today, at age 72, Brian Bone understands what a gift it is to take a deep breath of sweet, fresh air.

Write a letter to an elected official, explaining the importance of making sure that people have clean air to breathe. Use examples from “The Killer Smog” in your letter. Send it to “Smog Contest” by May 1, 2016. Ten winners will each receive a copy of Heroes of the Environment by Harriet Rohmer. See page 2 for details.