

The Tupperware Threat

When I was young, people worried that the world would be overrun with coat hangers. Those were the days when coat hangers were made out of heavy black wire. Nobody seemed to know where they came from. Their forefathers may have been purchased at some time in the misty past, or they may have come free with the dry cleaning. Wherever they came from, they were prolific. Maybe they bred in the closet. Maybe they spontaneously generated from closet dust. My favorite theory, which I read in Reader's Digest, was that socks were the larval form of coat hangers. That explained why socks vanished and coat hangers appeared. Whatever the reason, closets were always overrun with wire coat hangers. The good hangers, the ones with wooden frames that didn't stretch your clothes and leave you walking around with hollow humps on your shoulders, did not overpopulate. In fact, they were an endangered species. It was the wire hangers that bred like telemarketers. There was always a tangled bundle of hangers hanging from the closet pole like an angry hornet's nest between Dad's overcoat and Mom's rain slicker. Scouts dropped from this nest and formed interlocking colonies on the floor, threatening to drive out the indigenous shoe population. As a kid I did what I could to thwart this invasion, abducting hangers from the closet, twisting them into tortured shapes, and covering them with paper in an attempt to turn them into hang gliders and rocket ships. When I grew old enough to own a car I stole even more as I discovered they were perfect for hanging mufflers and reaming out gas lines. I had friends who used them for welding rods. Sadly, our efforts made nary a dent on the growing mass of coat hangers that were overrunning the world. Then, as mysteriously as it began, the threat receded. Wire hangers were driven out of their habitat by an invasive species of plastic coat hangers. These hangers did not breed. Occasionally they broke, but mostly they disappeared. Where did they go? Were they made of an exotic Chinese plastic that sublimed into a musty closet odor? Are they the larva of an undiscovered adult form that's about to overrun our attics? Nobody knows. But their presence was enough to dampen the ardor of the once irrepressible wire coat hangers. They ceased to breed and their numbers dwindled. For the first time in living memory, people opened their closet and couldn't find a coat hanger. I gathered the last survivors in our house and tried to start a rescue colony in my garage. They don't seem to breed in captivity, but they still make excellent muffler hangers.

As memories of the coat hanger menace faded, people tentatively emerged from the shadow of fear. The sun shone brightly once again, and young lovers made plans for the future. Then, just when you thought it was safe to go back in the water, the Tupperware Threat rose from the coat hanger's ashes. By "Tupperware" I don't mean the high-quality burping boxes invented by Earl Silas Tupper. I mean the cheap, flimsy plastic containers that worm their way into your house, innocuously wrapped around some food item you bought at the supermarket. "Oh look at this" you say innocently as you finish the lunch meat, potato salad, or whatever food came packed inside the container. "I can wash this out and use it to store leftovers." And so you do.

The invasion began quietly enough with margarine tubs. Some nameless inventor, tired of ripping his Wonder Bread to shreds while trying to veneer one side of it with hard margarine he'd scraped off a stick, decided there must be a better way. On a whim, he

tried emulsifying rapeseed oil, hydrogenating a small portion of it in the presence of a nickel catalyst, adding a touch of lecithin and a dash of Omega-3 fatty acids, and voila! He invented soft margarine! (Never look up things you intend to eat on Wikipedia.) It tasted like margarine, but it spread like mayonnaise. The only problem with soft margarine was that it was, well, soft. It didn't take a marketing genius to know that a new package was needed. Imagine if it came packed in boxes like regular margarine. The stick would begin to deflate as soon as you slid it out of the box. The ends of the paper wrap would untuck themselves, globs of margarine would slowly ooze out the ends and slide onto the floor, and you'd be left holding a greasy sheet of paper while the dog had a field day at your feet. Obviously soft margarine needed a special package. Soon the margarine tub appeared. Small, round, generally yellow or white plastic containers with a snap-on lid. And as soon as people emptied the first tub they thought "I could keep leftovers in this!" and the seeds of the Tupperware invasion were sown.

In truth, you could keep leftovers in a margarine tub, but not very much. They were too small to hold anything more than a dab of mashed potatoes or a few spoons of creamed corn. They were also round, which meant they didn't play well with others when you packed leftovers into a rectangular refrigerator. Most importantly, they were opaque. You couldn't see what was in them. Once you put leftovers into a margarine tub, it looked exactly like every other tub of leftovers in the fridge. Worse than that, it looked exactly like the tub that actually contained margarine, and margarine stays fresh (or at least unchanged) practically forever. Who has not experienced the thrill of reaching into a refrigerator on a cold February morning, intending to spread a little margarine on an English muffin, only to instead discover the less than pristine remains of Thanksgiving gravy? In the end, most people decided margarine tubs could be used for leftovers in a pinch, but they didn't really pose a threat. A few of them migrated to the garage, where they took their place beside the old coffee cans and mayonnaise jars filled with screws and nails, but the habitat for used margarine tubs was limited. In the end, margarine tubs turned out to be a shot across the bow. Not dangerous in themselves, but a warning of what was coming.

Encouraged by the near success of margarine tubs, a cabal of packaging engineers retreated to their secret underground laboratory and initiated genetic mutations to improve the margarine tub. They made it larger, to hold more leftovers. They made it rectangular, so more of them would fit into a refrigerator. And they made it translucent, to create the illusion that you would be able to peer through the sides and judge the content therein. In short, they made it irresistible. Their network of minions within the food industry had little trouble infiltrating it into products. Soon a wide variety of deli products came in resealable plastic bricks. Lunch meat, potato salad, crab dip, and other packaged delectables crept into our refrigerators, and from there into our cupboards.

Like most consumers, I was at first unaware of the danger these boxes posed. They were convenient, they kept food fresh, and they were the perfect size for packing leftover lastnights into my lunch. I innocently created a neat little stack of these faux-Tupperware time bombs in our cupboard, with the lids neatly stacked beside them. There was always one available when I needed one. Soon there were two available, even though I only needed one. Then there were a dozen, only some of the lids didn't quite fit. And you had

to be careful what order you stacked them in, because some of them didn't quite fit inside the others. Those big ones had to go on the bottom of the stack. Then there were the intermediate sizes. Finally the day came when I opened the cupboard and saw the plastic tubs and lids had spread to all three shelves and were threatening to push the coffee cups onto the counter. That's when I realized with horror – these things bred like, well, like coat hangers! Worse than that, like a particularly virulent virus, they were constantly mutating. That's why the lids weren't interchangeable. Some were slightly larger than others. Some had corners that were slightly more rounded than others. Some were shorter and wider. The lids came in different colors, too. We had red lids, clear lids, dark blue lids, and light blue lids. For a while I struggled to come up with a taxonomy that would describe the variations and let me predict which lids would fit which containers, but it was hopeless. There were too many variations, and the differences were too subtle.

I wish I could end this story by telling you how we ended this menace, but alas we have found no cure. I exiled some to the garage, where they took their place beside the coffee cans and margarine tubs filled with screws and nails. We pressed a few into use as cat food and water bowls, but the number deposed by these tactics was woefully inadequate. The nest in the cupboard continued to grow. One day my wife went into a rampage and tossed dozens of containers and lids into the trash. The containers are so prolific that within days the difference was hardly noticeable. Except that since the lids she threw away didn't necessarily match the containers she ditched, we now have a jumble of lids which may, or may not, match our jumble of containers. The only thing more frustrating than searching through a pile of lids for the one and only lid that matches the container you just filled with leftover mashed potatoes is searching through the pile while wondering if there is, in fact, a match for the container. We even tried buying resealable containers at the grocery, hoping that like the plastic coat hangers that ended the metal hanger threat, these purchased containers would staunch the flow of wild containers. Sadly, this was not the case. The purchased containers were, as we hoped, infertile, but they failed to displace the native species. Recently I've spotted a few differently colored lids that makes me worry that they may now be cross-breeding.

I do have one ray of hope. Nature has a way of taking care of overpopulation. I don't know if the faux-Tupperware will suddenly rush to the sea like lemmings, if it will fall prey to a plastic-munching microbe, or if a new predator will begin ravaging the cupboards of North America. I only know that something will end this menace. I just hope the cure will not be worse than the disease.

Note: This story is dedicated to my wife, Betsy. She is the one who first identified this menace, and she has been waging an unceasing battle against these plastic parasites ever since.