

# FUTURE SCIENCE FICTION

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# AUTHOR, AUTHOR!

GEORGE H. SMITH has a knack for the unusual, and his stories do not require more than the short-short lengths for the most part. However, when he has a theme which can take somewhat longer treatment, I think you'll agree that he can handle it. ★  
★  
★



**the night  
the TV  
went  
out**

by George H.  
Smith

**The most horrible thing is that some will consider this a horror story.**

**T**HEY WERE sitting in the living room, protected from the menacing darkness by the warm and friendly glow of the TV set—two people who, after six years of marriage, had grown more used to seeing each other in this than in any other light.

It was such a good night for TV, too, one of the best of the week. First there was Uncle Dandy's Quiz Hour; then Jeff and Melvin; and finally Ma & Pa at home. Three of the very best shows, one right after the other.

"And now, Mrs. Lee, when you come out of this, your husband won't know you; you won't even know yourself!" Uncle Dandy said to the fat woman as he strapped her into the make-believe reducing machine that was actually a dye vat. Uncle Dandy was very serious, his gargoyle's face without a trace of smile, but the audience was screaming with laughter. They knew, as did the watchers at home, that the silly woman was going to be dyed a brilliant purple; it served her right, too, for she hadn't known the answers.

And then, suddenly, instead of the familiar scene in Quiz Palace there on the screen was the stern face of a man.

"*What would you do?*" the voice menaced them. "*What would you do if your TV set broke down tonight? How*

could you find a repairman at this hour? What would you *do*?"

"Oh, Andy..." Claire Moore grabbed her husband's arm.

"**I**MAGINE what it would be like. Imagine what your life would be," the announcer went on. "Could you stand to miss a whole evening of your favorite entertainment?"

His voice became a little more friendly. "There is only one way that you can really be safe..." He left this life line hanging just beyond reach, while he gazed at them with smiling contempt.

"You can be among the thirty million American families that are 'two-set' families. Families that have taken the sensible, American act of acquiring a second set as insurance against the possibility of one set's failure. But ...listen to these shocking facts. We here at TV Sales Incorporated recently conducted a survey and found out that there are still over ten million families in this country who have only one set."

The voice rose now in righteous indignation. "Imagine that, ladies and gentlemen. In this year of 1967, in this grandest country of them all, there are still ten million heads of households who think so little of their loved ones as to expose them to the inconvenience, the danger, of

being without their evening programs. Ten million men who are so thoughtless and so unpatriotic!"

Andrew Moore felt his wife's eyes resting on him in the semi-darkness. He looked at her briefly and had the momentary feeling that there was as much hate in her eyes as there was in the voice of the announcer.

"**I**CAN ONLY say to those ten million men that they wouldn't be without two cars, would they? They wouldn't be without two washing machines or two refrigerators? They haven't forgotten the immortal words of the President of the United States, have they? Those words from last year's State of the Union message—those words which will forever ring down through the corridors of history."

The announcer's face and voice faded away to be replaced by those of the rugged, tanned, silver-haired President. "America will always be the greatest nation in the world as long as its people remember to buy two, not one. Buy the large economy size, not the small one. This isn't a small country, my fellow Americans, this is a large, economy sized country. We will never know here the declines that set in in Rome and Great Britain as long as we all remember this creed, and that the Big Spon-

sor up in the sky is always on our side."

"Oh, isn't he wonderful," Claire breathed. "Isn't he just the greatest president we ever had?"

**T**HE ANNOUNCER was back. "That was your President, ladies and gentlemen. That was the President of the United States talking to you. And what are you going to do about it?" The smiling face became grim and the steely eyes seemed to probe into Andrew Moore's very soul. "I'll tell you what you're going to do! *You're not going to buy one, you're going to buy two!*" Moore felt very guilty; how could he have been so blind? What if his installment payments were already larger than his salary? There were always ways...

The announcer was replaced by a quintet of blondes who sang, "Don't buy one, buy two, two, two. Don't buy one, buy two and your wife will love you."

"And now, ladies and gentlemen, we bring you..." The screen went blank and there was silence.

"Andy, what's the matter?" Claire gasped, her voice choked with fear. The TV had never been dark before; its friendly green glow had never ceased to light their living room since the day they had ventured forth from the sheltering light of their

parents' sets to set up one of their own.

"I'm sure it will come right back on, dear," Moore said, groping uncertainly for the light switch.

"But why should it go off? They never go off any more."

There were no friendly faces, no joyous shouts or jingles; nothing but a horrible, deathly silence. "Oh, what are we going to do?" wailed Claire. "How could you let this happen, Andy? If you loved me, you'd have bought another set a long time ago."

**A**NDREW MOORE looked at his wife, and she seemed strange in the different light. He had scarcely ever seen her except by the light of the TV, for by the time he got home after putting in his twelve hours at the office, the TV had always been on. And when he had been going with her they had never gotten very far away from her parents' set. He was faintly surprised to see how sickly white her face was.

"But Claire, I do love you," he said in too loud a voice since he wasn't used to talking without the din of the TV. "It's just that right now I can't afford to buy anything else. You don't want me to end up in debtors prison do you?"

"It's just like the man said

...it's so quiet. And we're going to miss Jeff and Melvin and Ma and Pa. Andy, go get another set! This wouldn't have happened if we had another set," Claire said almost in tears.

"You don't mean tonight?"

"Yes, I *do* mean tonight! Right now! I can't stand this...it's so quiet and lonely."

"You really want me to... go outside...at night?" Moore couldn't believe it.

"You'll just have to. I'll go insane in this silence. And what will the neighbors think if they notice our set is off? Then they'll know we're one of those one-set families that the President was talking about."

"But, Claire...you know what it's like outside at night. There's no light, and the rodents and night gangs..."

"I'll go crazy, crazy...do you hear?" Claire screamed.

"But, honey, you know we can't afford anything else," Moore said, putting an arm about her shoulders. She shook it off angrily.

"Of course we can afford it. Everyone can afford everything they want these days."

"You mean you want me to put on a collar? To become a client?" Andrew Moore asked, in a shocked voice.

"**WELL?** WHAT'S so wrong with that?" she demanded, "No one with any sense tries to Free Agent it any more. Look at the Wil-

liams'. He signed with Central Electric a year ago, and they've already replaced both their cars."

"But to get those cars, he had to become a bondsman, to sign away the rest of his life. Is that what you want me to do?"

"Look at you, Mr. Free Agent," Claire's voice rose shrilly. "You work twelve hours a day and what have we got to show for it? Not even two TV sets!"

"All right! All right! I'll go out. I'll see if I can find a repairman. It wouldn't do any good to call one 'cause you have to sign a note before they'll come out." He started to put on his protective outer clothing and reached for his smog mask.

Claire was really crying now, and she gasped between sobs, "Repairs...repairs... what good will that do?"

"Take it easy, dear," Moore said, patting her shoulder. "I'll be back pretty soon, and everything will be all right."

**O**UTSIDE, Moore groped his way through darkness unbroken by street lights. Los Angeles had long ago done away with such socialistic anachronisms as street lights; after all street lights meant taxes, and taxes meant less of the good things of life for everybody.

With only his flashlight to break the blackness, Moore headed toward his garage.

The greasy smog which smeared itself against the driveway swirled aside as he walked and crawled coldly up his pants legs. It clung to his clothes and face mask and muffled his footsteps.

The car, fortunately, coughed into life at once, and he breathed a sigh of relief. Being on foot in the city at night would have been an almost automatic death-sentence; if the hot-rodders didn't catch you, the cops would.

He had no idea which way to go. The darkness and the smog confused him so that he couldn't remember the way to the nearest General TV Store. Taking a chance, he headed toward the freeway. There weren't many cars out at this time of night, so driving was easy, even in the oily thickness; and in a few minutes, he saw the lights of the toll gate directly ahead.

A uniformed employee of Freeways Incorporated took his dollar and let him by with only a faintly-suspicious look; in a few moments he was heading in the Harbor Freeway toward the stack, where he could change to the Hollywood Freeway. In Hollywood, he assured himself, he'd have no trouble locating a TV store or repairman.

He was passing near what had once been the downtown district—he could see dark skeletons of buildings on his left. They were mostly aban-

doned now as business had drifted to the suburbs.

Suddenly, he saw them coming, and it didn't take much guessing to know what they were. Two souped-up jalopies racing along in the wrong lane with motors wide open, swerving to follow him as he speeded up instinctively. Rodders; teenage killers who hunted the streets for prey like a tiger stalked the jungle.

**H**IS FOOT pressed the gas pedal to the floor. You'd think that Freeways Incorporated would keep rodders off their roads; but free enterprise being free enterprise Andy guessed the kids' dollars were as good as anyone else's, even if they did leave half-a-dozen wrecks for the company to clear away the next morning.

His little G. A., Model 100, was doing everything it had, but those two cut-down jobs were gaining on him. He could hear the hooting of their horns and sirens, as well as the shouts of the rodders themselves, over the pounding of his own motor now. Pretty soon they would be up with him; pretty soon one of them would start to ease him toward the guard rail while the other one stayed close behind him to box him in. There would be a grinding of brakes and a crashing of metal as he plowed into the rail; then a burst of flame, and there

would be another kill for them to send pictures of to *Life*.

Sweat poured down Andrew Moore's forehead, and his hands on the steering wheel were soaking wet. If only he hadn't come out; if only he had bought that extra set they needed months ago. Now he was going to die for his lack of foresight.

There were headlights up ahead and a spotlight picked his car out briefly. It was a Pinkerton armored car on patrol, but seeing no protection tag on Moore's windshield, it kept going. Police service was one more thing he hadn't felt he could afford. Now if he were the client of some big firm, he'd automatically have had police protection.

ONE OF THE rodder cars pulled up almost even with him and he could see it was a red convertible with two boys and a girl in the front seat. He could see their faces quite clearly in the rearview mirror and the blood lust he read there chilled him. It wouldn't be long now. If only...

Suddenly he saw a chance. Up ahead was a cut-in with a big sign *Do Not Enter Here*. If only he could throw them off for a few minutes he might—he just might—get away.

With his heart in his mouth, Andrew Moore swerved just as he got to the

cut-in. His tires screamed their torture and the car tottered on two wheels; but he missed the guard rail, and one of the two rodder cars failed to make the turn. It kept going straight down the freeway but the other one, the red convertible, kept after him although it lost a little ground.

He was in downtown Los Angeles now; the abandoned buildings and torn-up streets told him that. If he could lose himself in the tangle, he'd be safe.

The streets were terrible. The car bounced and groaned, and there wasn't any light at all—not even that supplied by the hundreds of advertising signs that lined the freeway. For a moment Moore had a vagrant, socialistic thought; maybe it wasn't so bad to have taxes and street lights. And then he wondered if it was really interference with free enterprise to keep business firms from tearing up the old public streets to get materials for building their own toll streets.

THE RODDER CAR was gaining again; Andrew Moore abandoned his subversive thoughts and swerved around a corner into a wider, slightly less torn-up street, and almost lost his life again. This street had been converted into a dump yard and was blocked from curb to curb with piles of scrap metal. He



slammed on his brakes and came to a skidding halt just short of the first mound. The occupants of the rodder car heard the squeal of brakes and, sensing a kill, came hurtling at him. They weren't to be balked of their prey even if it meant their own lives. Moore quickly clashed his gears and shot into reverse. The red convertible hurtled past, just missing his front fender. It must have been doing almost ninety when it smashed into the metal gate that blocked the entrance to the junk yard itself.

There was a burst of flame and screams that ended rather abruptly. Moore stopped his car and got out. He ran toward the other car as he saw someone scrambling out on hands and knees. He pulled the small figure in jeans and shirt free, and they staggered to safety just as the gas tank blew up with more than ordinary violence.

"Ya killed them! Ya dirty bastard, ya killed them! Why'd ya do it?" Small fists beat at Andy and he pushed the small figure away from him. It was a girl with close cropped hair and grease streaked face.

"I didn't kill anyone; they were trying to kill me, weren't they?"

"So what? Who asked ya to come down here?" He could see now that the girl was crying. Moore looked at her more closely, and decided she couldn't be more than

sixteen. "Ya didn't have to kill Joe and Harry. They was good guys."

"LOOK, I'M sorry; I didn't mean to." He tried to pat her shoulder but she clawed at his face with her nails. He pushed her away and she sat down on the curb and started to sob. He stood looking down at her for a minute and then turned to walk toward his car. He had gone only a few feet when her sobs turned to curses.

"Ya dirty, lousy son." Her yells became more intimate, and Andrew Moore felt the back of his neck turning red. He started to reply in equal terms, but the sight of the pitiful little figure sitting there changed his mind. He walked back and stood beside her.

"Come on, kid. We better get out of here," he said gently. "The fire might attract a night gang or the cops."

"I don't care. I hope some one does come, and I hope they kill you."

"Look...I said I'm sorry. I'll drive you home."

"I ain't got any home. There was just Joe and Harry. They picked me up when I was a punk kid of seven. They let me tag along after the orphanage was closed to save taxes. There wasn't nobody but them and the gang."

"Well...couldn't you go back to the gang?"

"Ya green or somethin',

mister? Ya can't be with the gang 'less ya got a rod. They don't want no footies."

"I wish there was something I could do to help you."

Her reply was less than appreciative.

"Why you little..." Moore started to say, then just shrugged his shoulders. "Look, kid, I've got to go. I was looking for a TV repairman when you and your buddies...never mind. My wife will be worried if I don't get home soon."

"Go to hell!"

"Well, goodbye," Moore said and walked toward his car. The smog was thicker than ever and he wondered if he would be able to find his way out of this jungle of decayed buildings.

**"HELLO, MISTER,"** said a tall, skinny man leaning up against the door of Andrew Moore's car. He wore no smog mask and had several week's growth of beard on his face. "This is a pretty nice buggy ya got here, mister. Musta cost ya quite a lot."

Moore stepped closer, meaning to ignore him and just get into his car. The man shifted just enough so that he was in the way; his watery eyes gleamed red where the headlights reflected in them. There was a reek of cheap wine about him; Moore wondered if he had been soaked in the stuff. "Do you mind if I get into my car?" he asked stiffly.

"What'ya wanta do that for? Why don't ya stick around and talk to me? To me and my buddies?" the man said and as he spoke four other shadowy figures stepped out of the fog.

"What'ya got there?" the first man asked, pointing to the hot-rod girl who was being dragged along by two of the others. Her body was limp and there was blood on her face.

"You'll never guess what we found, Sam" said a man who was as fat as Sam was slim, "You'll never guess."

"Well, now, Fatso," Sam said, "it looks like ya done picked up a little hunk of somethin'."

"Sure did, Sam, we sure did," Fatso chuckled as he caught the girl by the hair and lifted her face into the light. "Not bad-looking stuff either. What you got, Sam?"

"Oh, just a guy. Not much of a guy but he's got a car...and a little dough on him, I hope."

"Well, well," Fatso said, "I guess there ain't four luckier old winos in this jungle than us, is there, boys?" He giggled in a high falsetto voice.

"See here, you...you let that girl alone," Moore said, starting forward. He got two steps before something crashed down on his head and he went down, his face in the filth of the street.

**"KIND OF** hated to use that bottle on him," he

heard Sam's voice vaguely. "It still had a few drops in it."

"Well, don't worry; we'll be getting plenty more," Fatso said jovially. "Let's load these two into the car and take them to the Square."

"What? And let all the other bo's in on it?" one of the other men said. "That's for the birds."

"Now, Bert, you're a pretty good guy but you ain't been in L. A. long enough," Sal said evenly. "You don't know this here jungle. Al Rice is the boss around here, Bert, and if you don't do things his way, you don't last long, do you, Fatso?"

Fatso giggled again. "That's right, Bert. We'll just take these two and the car along to the Square. Chances are that Al will take the car and most of the money for the general fund. But unless he wants this kid himself, we'll get to keep her. It ain't a bad deal, and with several thousand wins you got to have some sort of boss."

"Say, this guy ain't all the way out," Sam said leaning over Moore.

"Well, Sam?" Fatso said. "Sammy boy, put him out."

A heavy boot descended against Andrew Moore's head and darkness closed in.

**H**E AWOKE to the sound of voices and an almost overpowering evil odor. He was lying on his side on a cement floor, his hands and feet

bound. The girl's hard young body was pressed close against his.

"Ya comin' around, Buster?" she asked.

"Yeah. I guess so," Moore said. "That kick in the head kind of did me in."

"I'll bet. You're just lucky ya got a hard head. After the wine bottle and the boot, you're lucky to be around at all."

"Where are we?"

"Pershing Square. Down in what used to be a big underground garage. Must be the wino headquarters in these parts."

Moore lifted his head slightly and was sorry almost immediately; streaks of fire seemed to leap through it, but he could see a little bit. They were on one of the huge vaulted parking selections, but there weren't many cars in it now—only six or seven old wrecks, and his own G.A. But lying or sitting about dozens of fires were some hundred or so men. The smoke from the fires made the place look like one of the pits of hell.

"What do you think they'll do with us?" Moore asked.

"I don't know," the girl said. "Outside of a few obvious things, that is. Sam and the other boys are in talking to Al, the boss of this jungle."

**"I'M SORRY** they caught you," Moore said. "Say, what's your name?"

"Sue. Not that it means anything to you."

"Mine's A n d y. I just thought we might as well get to know each other."

"Yeah. Well, it won't be for long," the girl said between set teeth. "Here comes Fatso; I guess we hear the bad news now."

"Well, well...just look at them," the fat man simpered. "All cuddled up together, nice and cozy like." And then with mock severity, "You two behavin' yourselves while we was gone?"

"Go to hell, you fat slob," Sue said.

Fatso bent over them and the reek of cheap wine almost made Andrew Moore retch. "Now that ain't very nice. That's no way to talk to Fatso. You be nice to Fatso, girlie, and Fatso'll be nice to you."

"Don't make me laugh," the girl said. "What's a fruit like you know about being nice to a woman? I bet you don't even know what it's for!"

The fat man bent over the girl with a bottle of wine in one hand. "Oh, come now, girlie. Old Fatso knows a lot of things a kid like you never even thought of. I'll bet he'd make you squeal for more."

"All I can think of right now is a way to kick you," Sue said as her foot lashed out just missing Fatso's groin. He stumbled back laughing.

"**I**S THAT any way to treat a gentleman?" Fatso addressed himself to Moore as he seated himself on a box beside them. "Bet you didn't know I used to be a gentleman. Well, an important man anyway. Bet you didn't know I used to make \$75 a day."

"I'll bet," the girl said. Moore could feel her fingers against his wrist as she worked at his bonds. "The only way you ever made seventy-five bucks wouldn't be fit to talk about."

"That ain't so; that ain't so at all," Fatso said with drunken dignity. "I made it honest. I was a help to the community." He poked a finger in Moore's ribs. "Yes, sir, seventy-five dollars a day; and just for getting up on a witness stand and telling about people."

"What kind of people?" Moore asked, because he could see that the girl was trying to keep the old wino talking.

"Oh, Commies and Reds and things like that. All you had to do was keep telling the Committees they used to have that these people was Reds, and what rats they were. And you got your money. It was real easy back in those days, but finally they ran out of people to investigate and I couldn't make that kind of money any more."

"A stool pigeon, huh?" the girl said. "And a lying one at that." She wasn't having

much luck with the knots on Moore's wrists.

"**T**HAT AIN'T so; that ain't so at all!" Fatso protested. "I was just doing my duty as a citizen. That ain't any way to talk to old Fatso after he stuck up for you two."

"How did you stick up for us, Fatso?" Moore asked.

"Well, Al and some of the boys was all for taking you two down to Taylor Hospital and getting fifty bucks apiece for you. They don't get much chance to get nice fresh bodies to dissect there any more, so they don't ask questions when you bring a couple in."

Andrew Moore felt cold chills run up his spine and even Sue gasped.

"But old Fatso and some of the other boys agreed that it would be a shame to waste a nice young gal like you," Fatso went on putting a hand on Sue's leg.

"Thanks for small favors," the girl said.

"I told them we could get a lot more than fifty dollar's worth," he giggled. "And then, after they came around to my way of thinking on that, they still wanted to take buster here down and get fifty bucks for him."

"For me?" Moore gulped.

"Yeah, for you," Fatso said, putting a hand on Moore's shoulder. "But I pointed some things out to them." He winked.

"Thanks," Moore gulped, "for small favors."

"Ah, an old fat fool like you couldn't do anything to anybody," Sue gibed. She had given up working at Andy's wrists.

"**Y**OU JUST think so," Fatso said, getting to his feet. He swayed slightly as he lifted the bottle to his lips and drained it. "You know, I oughta show you right now."

"Ah, you couldn't show anybody anything," the girl said and added some personal observations.

Fatso was infuriated. "I'll show you, I'll just show you," he said and reached for the girl. She rolled and twisted out of his reach but he caught her finally, still holding his empty bottle.

Sue wrapped her legs around him and hung on as she cried, "Now, Andy, now. In the back of the head, with your feet."

Fatso tried to pull away, lashing at the girl with his fist and with the bottle. He missed with the bottle and it smashed on the cement. Andrew Moore rocked back painfully on his hands and launched his feet at the fat man's head. It wasn't a powerful blow—it couldn't be with his bound feet—but it knocked Fatso forward and Sue rolled out of the way. The wino hit face-down on the shattered bottle, groaned, shuddered and lay still.

"Gawd!" Sue said, "That bottle bit. I couldn't have planned it better myself." She watched as blood mixed with wine ran out from under the fat man. She used another piece of the broken bottle to saw at the cords which bound her wrists.

**M**OST OF the men in the big garage were either asleep or busy about their fires; no one noticed the two until they were almost to Andrew Moore's car; then they had to run for it. Sue tripped up one black-bearded fellow, while Moore dropped another with a stick of wood. They were halfway up the ramp leading to the street before most of the winos and bums knew they were free.

Approximately thirty minutes later, Moore stopped his car at the end of a truck freeway and let Sue out. "I've had enough," she said. "I'm getting out of this town; I don't want any more of it. It's just like all the other big places, strangling itself in smog and too many people. Maybe it ain't any different out in the country, but at least I'm going to give it a try."

Moore shook hands with her. "I'm sorry about Joe and Harry."

"Ah, I guess it was bound to happen sooner or later. I guess there wasn't much future in hot-roddin' anyhow. You're not a bad guy, Andy.

It's too bad you're stuck in this town for the rest of your life."

"Maybe I won't be," he said and smiled. "Where you heading for? We might run into each other again."

"Central Valley, I guess. I hear you can pick fruit up there without putting on a company collar."

"Well...so long. I might see you again."

"Not if you sign a company bond for that other TV set," Sue replied, and was gone. A northbound truck was already slowing to pick her up.

**A**NDREW MOORE stared after the disappearing lights of the truck for a few seconds. As he started his car again, his eyes fell on the big signboard across the highway.

**"T I R E D O F H A R D  
W O R K A N D W O R R Y ?"** it read. **"W A N T P E A C E A N D  
S E C U R I T Y ? I T I S W A I T -  
I N G F O R Y O U . B E C O M E  
A G E N E R A L A U T O C L I -  
E N T . T H I S I S T H E B E S T  
B O N D A G E D E A L I N  
A M E R I C A T O D A Y . A N Y  
L O C A L O F F I C E W I L L  
G I V E F U L L D E T A I L S ."**  
At the bottom in very small print were the words, *"Despite the propaganda of our competitors, our overseers are not permitted to use whips on clients."*

Moore reached home just as the sun was beginning to peak through the smog. He opened the front door and

went in to find the TV on and Claire still up.

"Oh there you are," she said. "I see you didn't find a repairman."

"No, I didn't; did it come back on by itself?"

"Oh, no. It was never really off," Claire said and laughed. "It's real funny. They just

cut it off at the station for fifteen minutes so we could see how it would be without a set. It was awfully clever, don't you think?"

"Yeah. Awfully clever," Moore said. "Awfully clever."

