

HAPPY NEW YEAR

The tree stood solemnly in the corner, giving off no aura of the festive season that had once been such an important part of everyones lives. The tree, only half trimmed was only there out of consideration for the younger members of any of these family's.

Homes in which the parents and older children had been witness to the previous years events had no tree, nor did they even try to celebrate the holiday season. "Why bother?" would have been the stock answer if any one had asked.

The fact was that it was not just Christmas but every day of their lives had been turned upside-down since it all started 5 years before. At first people felt that the government would surely rescind the order and seek a better solution to the problem. This was America, such a thing could never happen!

However, the edict had continued to be enforced however, and an unbelievable and irreversible depression had come over each and everyone. And what was just as frightening were those daily reminders that each person had to face throughout the year.

A vacant place at a dinner table or that empty house down the street were constant reminders of that "New Years Event" both past and present. Even the children were not spared. Every spring it became harder to field a good baseball team when last years pitcher

or short stop was missing. The daughters dance recital was not up to past standards because their teacher was no longer available.

There was always those who tried to "beat the system", almost but inevitably failed. There was even the story about the mechanic that tried to disconnect the "contact prong" from under the cars frame only to find that the device had it's own warning system. the result, he was placed in the lead vehicle the following New Year.

There had also been numerous cases reported of families that had tried to avoid the event by escaping into less inhabited areas. But they had been tracked down and arrested and charged with "unsportsman" like conduct.

Some families actually seem to cope with the situation better than others during the early spring and summer some tried to make a normal life for themselves. But as fall approached or even the slightest suggestion of Christmas surfaced, they too reacted like everyone else, becoming discouraged and deeply depressed.

Invitations to one anothers home stopped, friends barely spoke and except for the littlechildren, everyone seemed to simply close up into a shell-like existence, each counting off the days and weeks until the "New Year". Life became unbearable!

As the first day of the new year dawned, you could almost feel the scream of anguish roar through the community. No one had slept for days, eaten, or done anything except sit, terrified and mute waiting for the signal they knew was inevitable. Each hoping and

praying that they might be the lucky one. For in *this society* you lived or died by luck!

As Bill Duyer pulled out of the driveway, he could see the "Monitors" circling up and down the street checking each home to make sure all the occupants had obeyed the signal. If one didn't have their own means of transportation or were too old to drive "car pools" were available!

No one was given any specific route, you could go where you choose, as long as you stayed in your own county. One summer a couple of years before Bill had spent his weekends trying to figure out what might be a safe route but finally he came to the conclusion that there simply was none and that his time would be better spent by being with his family while he still had the chance.

He could hear the hum from his own "Contact Prong" as it searched the road ahead for the "cable". He shook his head in disbelief, "how ironic, *they'd* originally been set up only to take your money, not your life!" Then he saw one! He felt his stomach cramp and he started to sweat. He hoped Jean, his wife, hadn't spotted it yet, but one look at her expression told him different. Fortunately the kids were still too young to understand what was going on. For them, it was simply a *fun outing* on a holiday afternoon.

He and his wife both let out a collective sigh of relief, when the car passed safely over the cable, it had obviously either been

very old or it had malfunctioned. Whatever the cause a prayer crossed his lips.

He could hear explosions in the distance, as one poor devil after another made contact. Bill tightened his grip on the wheel, "stupid, as if that would do any good." A big car, moving fast, passed them. Funny, some people thought that a high rate of speed might confuse the *activators*. But as the car turned the next corner there was a loud explosion. The driver had been wrong! He couldn't help but wonder who its occupants might have been. A member of the school board? Maybe the mayor himself. "No one was exempt."

For the next couple of hours his luck held and he began to feel that perhaps he and his family would be all right. Then as he turned a corner, there was another one! He stared at it, as if it were for the first time, the whole idea still unbelievable! The hideous black cable looked like a dozing snake, its body stretching across his path, from curb to curb. One end attached to the base of the pole that was topped by a sign whose lettering seemed to shout out the words "Speed-Vascar Enforced". To the back of the sign was attached the explosive device that would ignite the highly sensitive chemical now moving like some deadly wave of lava throughout the entire length of the cable. When you crossed over it and the prong on the front of your vehicle made contact the chemical would be ignited and the car would instantly explode, destroying it and everyone inside.

He screamed a silent prayer as he felt his tires bump over the cable. Nothing happened! There was no explosion! "Dear God, I must have reached it just ad the power had been shut off." His body sagged back into the seat, he could feel Jean's head quivering as it came to rest against his shoulder.

Later when he tried to recall anything about the drive home, He realized it was a blank. He did remember putting the children to bed, giving his wife a sedative, but then nothing, until what must have been much later, when he found himself sitting in front of the TV, his hand guiding the tape of the President's infamous speech into the mouth of the VCR. He knew the words by heart.

"Citizens of America, this is your President speaking." Bill smiled when he remembered that the man had died, during his first year out of office, by the same method, he'd proposed for so many others.

"It has been decided by your government that drastic steps must be taken to curb this country's devastating dilemma of over-population. Bill shook his head, 'politicians sure like to use the big words, didn't they?' As you know many other governments have taken absolutely inhumane methods to accomplish this task, such as the wholesale use of poison gas or other systems of genocide, that we would never consider. "That is not the American Way!"

"The method we will implement, we feel, will not only be effective, but will embody our spirit of 'fair play'! Bill felt the urge to put his foot thru the TV.

"So this is what we have decided. Starting next new Years Day and continuing annually as long as it is necessary; there will be a 6 hour period in which every citizen of this great land will be required to spend his or her time in their cars and drive throughout their own counties."

"As you know, on thousands of streets, all over the country there are still signs reminding us of a day when our citizenry wee not so law-abiding. These are the 'Vascar' warning signs. Bill turned down the sound letting his body sag back into the chair, he knew this part by heart. When he turned it up, again the President was just finishing.

"My friends, knowing you will all see the wisdom and fairness of this decision and will therefore cooperate, I can only wish you good luck and God speed. Thank you."

He knew it was probably stupid, but listening to this tape after each '*successful*' New Years Day had become a kind of good luck omen for he and his family. But this time when he leaned forward and pressed the eject button on the remote, his eyes focused on the small trapdoor, only now it wasn't a trapdoor, but a huge mouth, that seemed to be smirking back at him!

He rose up in horror, slipped, fell to his knees. His clenched fists smashing against his mouth, "Oh dear God, No, Please nooooooooo....."