

Pat Cadigan ("*The Coming of the Doll*," June 1981) offers a mordant and surprising tale about a young couple who are about to hook into the wonderful world of pay-TV...

# The Day the Martels Got the Cable

BY  
PAT CADIGAN

**L** Lydia had stayed home from work to take delivery on the washer and dryer before. So this time David would have Lydia call him in sick and he would wait for the cable TV people to come. Sitting at the kitchen table enjoying the luxury of a second cup of coffee, he skimmed the front page of the newspaper while Lydia hurriedly made herself up in the tiny downstairs bathroom.

"You sure you don't want me to drive you in?" he called over his shoulder.

Lydia poked her head out of the bathroom, holding a mascara brush between two fingers. "Not unless you want the car for some reason. Do you?"

"Nah. I was just thinking though, I always do the driving and you're not really used to the rush-hour traffic. Awake, anyway."

She struck her tongue out at him. "That to you. I was driving in rush hour long before I hooked up with you and I'll be driving in it long after you run off and leave me for a younger woman." She disappeared back into the bathroom.

"That will be the day." He got up and went to the doorway of the bathroom. "When I go, I'm taking the car with me."

"Men," Lydia said, staring down at the hand mirror as she worked on her eyelashes. "You're all alike."

"We attend a special school for it when we're young." David looked at her admiringly. She had on what she called her dress-for-success get-up, tailored navy-blue jacket and skirt with a soft white blouse. What the well-dressed board chairperson was wearing this year. David had asked her once if it wasn't a bit overwhelming for

an office manager. All in fun, of course. Truth to tell, her career was outstripping his own.

He reached out and stopped her as she was about to apply her lipstick. "Sure you don't want me to call you in sick, too? We could wait for the cable people together and then afterwards not watch the movie channel."

"That would look good, wouldn't it?" She gave him a quick but thorough kiss before she put on her lipstick. "I mean, the both of us working at the same company and we both happen to come down with stomach flu — ho, ho — on the same day. They'd buy that, for sure."

David shrugged. "So? We've got two bathrooms. Two toilets, no waiting. They can send the corporate secret police out to check if they want."

"David."

"I know, I know." He sighed. "It was worth a try."

"Don't think I don't appreciate it." She grinned redly, looking him up and down. "And don't think I'm not tempted. Say, poppa, did anyone tell you you do things for a bathrobe and pajamas that no other man can do?"

"Plenty of women, all the time." He stepped in and posed behind her in the mirror over the sink. They made a perfect portrait of the odd married couple, one with her blonde chin-length hair carefully combed and the other with his tangled hair standing on end and morning stubble shading his cheeks. "Hey, if this were 1956, you'd be the

one in the bathrobe, you know."

Lydia looked pained. "Promise me that after we get the cable, you won't tune in Channel 87 in Dry Rot, Egypt, for old *Leave It to Beaver* reruns.

"How about *Ozzie and Harriet*?"

"I never liked them." She gave him a push. "Let me out. I gotta go set the world on fire."

David backed up and blocked the doorway. "Last chance, woman. Eight hours of work or sixteen hours of ecstasy — the choice is yours." He made a thrusting motion with his hips.

"Sixteen hours of ecstasy or 26 weeks of paid unemployment. Outta my way, hot pajamas." She honked him as she slipped past and he chased her into the living room.

"Anything I should know about this cable thing?" he asked as she rummaged through her shoulder bag for her car keys.

"Like what?"

"I dunno. You're the one who filled out all the forms and made the arrangements. Am I supposed to do anything with the TV before they get here?"

"Not that I know of." Lydia hooked the keyring around her little finger and pushed several papers back into her purse. "Just stand back and don't get in anybody's way."

David put his hands on his hips. "Well, if they come during Donahue, they're just going to have to wait!" He tossed his head.

"I never liked him, either. He's in-

sincere." Lydia offered her cheek for a kiss. Instead, he bit her on the neck and gave her an impertinent squeeze.

"Don't you love permanent press?" he whispered in her ear. "You can do all sorts of things and your clothes never wrinkle."

She poked his ticklish spot and squirmed away. "Try not to eat too many chocolate-covered cherries while you're watching the soaps this afternoon, dear. And be dressed for when the cable people come, will you?"

"Yes, dear," he said nasally. "Honestly, work, work, work — that's all I ever *do* around this place."

Lydia's smile was only half amused. "And take the chicken out to thaw for supper tonight."

"I will."

"I mean it. Don't forget."

"All right, already. I'll take the chicken out to thaw. I was taking chicken out to thaw long before I hooked up with you and I'll be taking it out to thaw long after you run off and leave me to find yourself."

"Just make sure that you do it *today*."

"I will. I *promise*. Now go to work before I rip all your clothes off." He did another bump and grind and she escaped out the door, laughing.

He watched from the living room window as she maneuvered the car out of the cramped parking lot in front of townhouse. Then he went upstairs to take a quick shower, keeping one ear cocked for the sound of the doorbell in

case the cable people came early. Why was it cable installers and delivery people could never give you a definite time when they would arrive at your home? They'd just tell you the date and you had to be there. Of course, they didn't come on a Saturday. They worked a straight Monday-to-Friday week, God *forbid* they should arrange their time to accommodate customers with like schedules.

Decadently, he decided not to shave after dressing and went back downstairs to pour himself a fresh cup of coffee and finish the newspaper. At ten o'clock he was fresh out of lazy things to do and just beginning to feel hungry. Well, what the hell — this was a free day. If he wanted to eat lunch early, he could.

The house seemed so quiet, he thought as he flopped down on the couch with a magazine and a sandwich. As he ate, he turned pages without really looking at them. Playing hooky from work wasn't so much fun when there was no one else to share it with.

He laughed at himself. *You sound like an old married man, fella*. An old married man. That wasn't such a bad description, considering whom he was married to. How did that old song go? *Lydia, ho, Lydia ... something, something*. The Marx Brothers had done it in one of their movies, hadn't they?

Lydia. He'd had some kind of industrial-strength good luck going for him when he'd met her. Everything

had just fallen into place — their relationship had progressed to marriage without missing a beat, and their marriage hadn't had anything missing in three and a half years. Companionship, love, sex, and everything in between — it was all there, just the way he might have imagined it. He *had* imagined it a few times, but in an abstract sort of way. There had been no one he would have filled in the woman's part with until Lydia had come into his life.

Not that he was living some kind of fairy tale, though. They had their problems, they argued, and Lydia had the ability to play the bitch just as well as he could be the bastard. But there was nothing seriously wrong, nothing that threatened them. Hell, he didn't even feel funny about her making more money than he did. They were beyond that kind of macho silliness.

David got up and looked out the window at the parking lot. No sign of the cable truck yet. He supposed they'd come in a truck with all kinds of equipment, ready to plug him into the wonderful world of pay-TV. He'd had a few misgivings about it when Lydia first suggested they subscribe to the cable. The image of himself and Lydia sitting in front of the TV, slaves of the tube and its programming hadn't been terribly appetizing. As a rule, they weren't much for TV watching. But there was the movie channel, and the idea of being able to watch uncut films at home had appealed to him. It would probably make them lazy about get-

ting out to the theaters, but that wouldn't be so bad. During the week they were both tired, and on the weekends they had to fight the crowds — the terminal acne couples, the families with the restless kids and/or squawling babies, and let's not forget the inveterate chatterboxes who seemed to think *they* were in *their* living rooms and couldn't refrain from adding their stupid comments at the tops of their lungs. Yeah, cable TV would be worth it if it would spare them that.

At 11 o'clock when he was already giving thought to having another sandwich, the doorbell rang. "Hallelujah," he muttered and went to answer it.

The small woman smiling up at him on the doorstep had a wild growing-out permanent and a broad, plain face. There was a length of black cable coiled around one shoulder and she held a bag of tools in her hand. "You Mr. Martel?"

He blinked. "Can I help you?"

"Cable-rama. I'm here to put in your cable."

David looked past her, saw the truck sitting in their usual parking place. "Oh. Sure. C'mon in."

The woman gave him a big grin, the skin around her eyes crinkling into a thousand deep lines. "Every time." She walked in, looked around, and went immediately to the television. David hesitated.

"Just you?" he asked. "I mean, did they send you out all by yourself?"

"Every time," she said again and

dropped her tool bag on the carpet.

"Every time what?" David asked, closing the door.

The woman never stopped grinning, even as she rolled the television on its cart out from the wall and knelt behind it. "Every time they open the door and see the cable man's a woman, their mouth falls open. Or they blink a lot." She showed her teeth cheerily. "Like you. They can't believe I can do it all alone."

David felt his face grow slightly warm. "That's not it at all. I just — well, these days you know, sending a woman by herself to people's houses is a risky kind of thing. I mean, times being what they are."

The woman detached the rabbit ears and UHF antenna and set them aside. "Yeah? You mean, like if somebody tries something funny or like that?" She picked up a tool David couldn't imagine a use for, a thing that seemed to be a cross between a wrench and a pair of pliers. "Anybody tries something, I adjust their fine tuning, see?" She wiggled her eyebrows. "They said you guys seemed to be OK."

"Oh, we are. But I thought they'd have to send three, four g— people out to do this."

"Oh, yeah. Back in the early days." She kept working on the back of the television set as she spoke, occasionally reaching for a different tool or gadget from her bag. "Now it's easy. Someday the technology's gonna get so good, you'll be able to install this stuff your-

self. Just click it onto the back of your set or something." She grimaced at the tip of a Phillip's-head screwdriver and wiped it on her workshirt. "You guys into video games?"

David shook his head.

"Ah. That's good. Video games are shit. Burn your goddamn tube out quicker. So do those videotape recorders. Got one of those?"

"No."

"Smart. Then you don't have to go unhooking this and hooking it back up again all the time. Better if you just leave it, unless the set has to go in for servicing."

"I wouldn't know how to remove it anyway."

"S'easy. But best not to fool with it. Play around back here, don't know what you're doing, next thing you know — zzzzt! Fried poppa." She raised one eyebrow. "Kids. You got any?"

"Nope."

"Good. I mean, well, you want 'em, you have 'em, I don't care. But if you have any in visiting or anything sometime, don't let them fool with this."

"Zzzzt," said David, smiling.

"You got it." She picked up one end of the cable which she had let slide off her shoulder onto the floor and began connecting it to the back of the television. The other end she screwed into a silvery outlet in the wall. Then she got to her feet. "Gonna play outside for a few minutes now. Don't touch anything. Don't turn the set on, OK?"

I'll try to get this finished up by the time Donahue comes on."

"We don't like him," David said. "We think he's insincere."

"Suit yourself. Half the women in this town get cable just so they can see him better. It's all the same to me." Still grinning, she stepped over the tools and let herself out.

All delivery and service people, David decided, had to go to some kind of training camp for vocational-quirkiness lessons. Then again, maybe if he made a living connecting people to Donahue, he'd be a character himself. He couldn't wait to tell Lydia about this one. Lydia had thought the two guys who had delivered the washer and dryer had been lunatics.

When the woman hadn't returned for several minutes, he went to the window to check on her. She was standing at the open back of the truck with some kind of meter in her hand. It was attached to a cable that ran out of the truck over the sidewalk and around the side of the house. She seemed to be muttering to herself as she twisted a button or dial on the meter. David raised the window.

"Are you sure you don't need me to turn on the set?" he called.

She looked up at him, startled. "Don't touch it! You didn't touch it, did you? Well, don't! Can't take any power right now; you'll blow up all my equipment!"

"Ok." He left the window up and wandered into the kitchen. Was it con-

sidered improper to fix yourself something to eat while a service person who was probably dying for lunch herself was still on the premises? Almost certainly. His stomach growled. He snagged a piece of cheese out of the refrigerator and then crammed the whole thing into his mouth as he heard her come back into the house.

"Almost done," she sang. "Few more adjustments, you're ready for the glory of Living Room Cinema. Trademarked."

He went back to the living room, trying to chew inconspicuously. The woman glanced up at him as she connected wires from a small brown box to the back of the set.

"Ah. Lunch. I'm dyin' for lunch. That's what I'm going for next, you bet." She pushed her frizz back from her forehead. "OK. C'mere. I'm gonna show you."

David swallowed the cheese and wiped his hand across his mouth.

"This here on top is the cable selector. S'got two buttons, A and B. One group of stations is on A, the other's on B. A is simple, mostly the local stations. B is complex — satellite stations and movie channel, sports and news networks, that stuff."

"How do I know what channels to turn to?"

"I'll give you a card before I leave, it's got all that stuff on it. And there's a free program guide. Right now, we wanna see how good it comes in, OK? Great. Go for it and turn her on."

David laughed a little and turned on the television. A game show sprang into life on the screen, looking a bit purple.

"OK. You're on A right now, see? The A button is pushed in. Flip around the dial and let's see everything else."

More game shows, some soap operas and a flurry of commercials flashed on the screen before David returned to the original game show.

"Great picture, huh?" said the woman, tapping his arm lightly with a screwdriver.

"Purple picture."

"You can fix that yourself later. Right now we're just interested in your reception. No snow, no rolling. Great. Isn't that great?"

"It's great," David said. Strange how service people always seemed to crave praise for whatever company they represented. "Do *you* have the cable?"

The woman's eyes widened as though he had asked her about her sex life. "Do I look like someone who would need the cable? Try the B channels. No, keep your hand on the dial, in case you've got to fine tune."

David opened his mouth to tell her there was no fine tuning connected with the channel selector and decided to humor her. Then perhaps she'd take her quirky little self out of his living room faster. He was beginning to tire of her and her jackrabbity conversational style.

He reached up with his left hand

and touched the box on top of the TV set. It was warm and tingly on his fingertips, and he almost snatched his hand back. The woman shifted her weight impatiently, and he thumbed down the B button.

Something hot and sizzling jumped into his left hand and shot up his arm. To his horror, he couldn't let go of the box. The hot, sizzling feeling hit his chest and streaked down his other arm before it began to burn through his torso. His last thought, as he turned his head toward the woman, was that she was reacting awfully nonchalantly to the electrocution of one of her customers.

**T**he woman stood staring at David with her arms folded. The fading expression on his face was typical — shock, panic, maybe a little betrayal. Probably thought he was being electrocuted. She'd heard the final connection was something like that, getting fried. Zzzzt! She grinned.

When the last bit of emotion had drained from David's face and his eyes had gone opaque, she produced something that might have been a lecturer's metal pointer from her back pocket and stepped around the back of the television again. She did something else to the connections she had made, and the TV screen went dark. David's arms dropped abruptly. The woman punched the A button. "Straighten up," she ordered.

David did so, his head still facing where she had been standing previously. She moved back in front of the TV and twisted the channel selector. David took three steps backwards and bumped into the coffee table.

"Easy there, poppa." She patted her pockets and found the small white card she needed. "Ok. Here we go. Channel 4, right. Channel 5." David held his arms out to his sides as if waiting either to catch someone up in a hug or be crucified. She changed the channel again, and he bent forward at the waist.

"Lotta talent there." The woman flipped through the channels, watching closely as David bent forward at the waist, bobbed up again, combed his hair with his fingers, pinched his nose and opened his mouth. "Siddown on the couch. Stand up. Stand on your left foot." David obeyed, his movements smooth and almost graceful. "O.K. Now the B channels. Do your stuff, poppa."

David walked around the room, turned on a lamp and shut it off again, mimed opening a drawer and searching through some files and danced a few shuffling steps.

"Great reception," the woman said. "One more and you're set." She consulted the card and turned to Channel 9. David did a bump and grind, slow and then fast. "Relax. this is only a test." She laughed and switched back to the A button. He stood motionless again, awaiting instructions. "You're

doin' great. Siddown."

David collapsed to the floor cross-legged.

"Oops. Shoulda told you to sit on the couch. Hell. Just stay there. Gonna take care of momma next. After lunch." She went into the kitchen and found the cheese in the refrigerator. She nibbled at it while she got the peanut butter and a loaf of bread out of the cupboard. As an afterthought, she opened a can of black olives.

Lydia Martel was having a carton of strawberry yogurt for lunch at her desk when the phone rang. She dabbed at her lips with a napkin before picking up the receiver.

"Lydia Martel." She paused, sitting back. "Oh, good. Any problems? How's the reception, any static?" She paused again, listening. "Good. Good. Now, how much did you say the installation fee would be? Uh-huh. And the regular monthly charge is what?" She scribbled the figures on a memo pad. "Yes, it *is* reasonable. That includes everything, right?" Lydia laughed a little indulgently. "I *can't* get away before 4:30. — Yes, there is something. Put him on vacuum before you leave. He knows where it is, even if he's never touched it. *All* the rooms. After that he can clean up the kitchen, I'm sure he left a mess from lunch. Have him take the chicken out to thaw, I'm positive he forgot.

"And, oh, yes — have him shave, will you? Thanks." 