

The Cutting Room
a short story
by Yvonne Navarro

"Daddy, down!"

Roger Nadab grinned at his two year old son's demanding voice and upstretched arms. He lowered himself to a crouch and looked the boy in the eye. "Brian," he

said patiently, using his best teacher-to-pupil tone, "you want to go up, not down. When I'm holding you is when you want to go down. Okay?"

The toddler smiled at him and pulled at the sleeves of Roger's shirt with chubby

fingers. "'Kay, daddy. Down?" The gray eyes that mimicked his mother's twinkled

and Roger had to laugh. "Up!" he cried as he swung the boy to his shoulders and

Brian giggled delightedly. "Let's go find your mom, okay?"

"Ma!" Brian agreed. For emphasis he tugged at a handful of Roger's hair as his

father piggy-backed him through the door and into the yard, bending his knees to

keep the child's head from discovering the top of the door frame. Roger spied Miriam across the yard, kneeling in the midst of a tangle of vegetable plants with some type of clawed mini-garden tool in hand. He ambled over with the boy

still on his shoulders and yanking at his hair like he was a horse in human form.

"What're you doing?" he asked. "Hoeing?"

His wife looked at him and rolled her eyes. "Not hardly, Rog. A hoe is a full sized tool with a long handle."

"Well, at least no one'll ever mistake me for a redneck," he said, raising his

brows at the sunburned skin on the back of her neck.

Miriam laughed outright. "With those glasses-- no way!"

"Ma, up!" Brian said gleefully.

"Down," Roger corrected. He lowered the toddler to the ground and wondered if anything was left of his scalp besides smooth skin and a missed tuft or two of

hair. He watched Miriam for a few moments as Brian began to make a small path of

destruction through the plants.

"It's almost time for the news," he said finally. "Are you coming in?"

"Sure," she answered. Her fingers quickly snatched the garden shears out of Brian's range. In the late afternoon sunlight Roger could see no difference between this woman whom he had married and created a child with and the fresh-faced girl he had pursued in his senior year of high school. The light stippling through the trees made the shine of her thick blonde curls more intense, until her hair resembled the fur of some strange, albino leopard; for a

second he felt a little breathless. She glanced up and caught his gaze, then smiled. "And what's on your mind, mister?"

"Me?" Roger asked innocently. He offered his hand and she used it to stand.

"I

don't know what you're talking about."

"Sure," she said. She tossed her gardening gloves next to the tools and scooped

Brian into her arms. "You get that look, you know?" Her eyes, pale gray and

almost washed out by the bright sun, glittered like colorless stones.
"Yeah," Roger said happily as he put an arm across her shoulders and they went inside. "I know."

Watching the newscast was habit for both of them, something which had been ingrained in almost everyone, Roger was sure, from birth. Every evening at six o'clock he gathered his family and sat in front of the television. The thought that he was already carrying on the tradition by "training" Brian made him uneasy, yet he seemed helpless to do otherwise. Most of the time Roger thought that he didn't really want to watch the newscast, and he was sure that most, if not all, of what was shown was little more than lies disguised by the colorful words and painstakingly correct smiles of the newspeople. Yet the thought of actually missing the newscast, even accidentally, left him feeling unfulfilled. He knew that if he got up in the middle of the program, went outside and walked down the street, the chances were better than ninety-nine percent he wouldn't see another human being on the sidewalk until the hour was over. It occurred to Roger that even Brian, with his never-ending supply of wriggles and gurgles, sat far more quietly than one would expect of a boy just entering his terrible twos.

He felt slightly sick as he wondered what unseen messages were being imprinted on their minds as they sat before the tube like good little soldiers. Nonetheless, he settled back, watching as the news anchor, a meticulously made-up woman in her mid-thirties, smiled widely at her unseen audience and began. "In nearby Atlanta this morning, the Reverend Jerry Ackerson led a group comprised of parents and members of his parish in what was supposed to be a local book-burning festival in the parking lot behind his small church. While only a small number of participants had been expected, news of the event had apparently spread to neighboring suburbs and literally thousands of people turned out, packing the streets and causing major traffic problems in the area surrounding the New Age Ecumenical Church. When questioned by reporters, attendants who had been stranded in their cars for over an hour insisted they didn't mind the wait, pointing out that the firefair had been organized to destroy books on the so-called Darwinian theory of evolution, a theory speculating that man was not created in the image of God but grew instead out of the inferior forms of life on the planet." The newswoman gathered her papers and tapped them neatly on the desk in front of her. "The festival is still in progress at this hour and the Atlanta Police Department has indicated that the New Age Ecumenical Church will receive its full cooperation and support during the remainder of the book-burning, regardless of its duration." "That's terrible!" Roger said. The senselessness of it made his fingers

twitch
in frustration. "They shouldn't burn those books-- what will happen when
they're
gone? There might be people who believe in that Darwin theory."
Miriam shifted Brian's weight and glanced at him. "You'd better be careful,
Rog.
Talk like that..." She let the thought go unfinished.
He shook his head. "But it's not right," he insisted. "There used to be
libraries where you could go to read anything you wanted, even check out
books
and take them home. People should be able to choose for themselves what they
want to believe--"
"Stop it!" Miriam snapped. Her tone of voice made Brian's eyes go wide.
"Times
change and it's too late to be radical. You have a family to think of. Me,
Brian-- we depend on you. Things happen to people who still talk about the
old
ways, Roger. Things so bad that no one speaks of them." She stared at him and
her expression was a complicated mix of fear and anger. "Don't bring that
kind
of talk into this house ever again."
Roger opened his mouth, then shut it and turned back to the television. Five
minutes ago there had been something he thought he should share with her; now
he
knew the words would most likely remain forever unspoken. He was suddenly
afraid
to look at her, afraid her love and terror would pull his secrets unwillingly
from his thoughts..
A different anchorperson was on now, another woman. She was young and black
and
her face was unlined; Roger thought she looked as if she'd never had to solve
a
problem of her own. Her practiced voice rolled out of the television in
stereo
and flowed around them almost hypnotically.
"On a local matter the City Police have discovered the makings of a small
print
shop in the basement of one of our own junior high schools. School officials
at
Folcott Intermediary School told police that a student tipped them to the
location of the press and the identity of a Folcott social studies teacher
who
has, according to the student, published an "underground" newspaper from this
basement location for several months. The student, who will remain
unidentified
due to age restrictions, even supplied the law enforcement agency with a copy
of
the publication that he said has been circulating for some time in the
school.
The dissident newspaper, which calls itself Return to Freedom, is packed with
propaganda and articles which claim that the New Age Commonwealth
continuously
withholds and/or alters information which the editor of Return to Freedom
feels
is pertinent to the people of the United States. Local officials have turned
the
matter over to the Federal Bureau of Administration, and here live to comment
on
these allegations is Virgil Thayer, Director of the FBA."
The hold the newscaster's voice had been maintaining over Roger abruptly

broke.

"What!" he gasped, jerking forward.

On the television the young woman turned slightly to her left and tilted her head upwards; in the corner of the television screen a mini-box appeared showing

a coolly groomed middle-aged man with a bland face. "Director Thayer," said the

anchorwoman, "what kind of publication is Return to Freedom, and why has the FBA

become involved in this matter?"

Oh my God, Roger thought frantically. He sensed Miriam looking at him quizzically but he couldn't risk eye contact with his wife right now, not yet.

MY GOD MY GODMYGOD--

--involved because of the highly sensitive nature of the statements made in this newspaper, which statements are entirely false and considered detrimental

to the New Age Commonwealth." The mini-picture expanded to fill the screen as Virgil Thayer stretched his lips into a small, calm smile. Roger felt a lump grow in his throat until it threatened to cut off his air. "But you can rest assured that the party responsible is being placed in custody at this very moment."

Somebody was pounding on Roger's front door.

The two officers sent to arrest Roger allowed him just under three minutes, time

only to throw on a jacket, quickly kiss Miriam and hold his son for one terribly

brief moment. He nuzzled the top of Brian's head, breathing deeply of the soap

and baby smell, and wondered when he would see his family again. For an instant

he squeezed too tightly and the child squirmed within the tight circle of his father's arms.

"Daddy," Brian said solemnly, "down."

He couldn't believe the kid had finally gotten it right.

The last thing Roger saw as they led him out the door was Miriam with Brian in

her arms, her face twisted in shock and indecision, sinking robot-like back onto

the couch to watch the rest of the newscast.

"What is this place?"

In spite of his fear, Roger was filled with awe at his surroundings. The two officers had driven him to the Commonwealth Building and escorted him to a secured elevator, then down to something called "Sublevel Six". There the younger of the two officers had been replaced by none other than Director Virgil

Thayer himself. Now the three men stood just inside the entrance to a dimly lit

cavernous room, the size of which made Roger almost stutter. The place was so big, in fact, that he could barely make out some kind of podium at the far end

of the corridor in which they now stood. Surrounding them were seemingly endless

shelves housing thousands upon thousands of videotapes. A closer scrutiny

revealed that the rows of shelves were really units placed end to end; beneath his feet he discovered tracks in the floor that followed a grid pattern and disappeared into the far shadows. None of the shelves were above reaching height, and it was at this point that the light ended, giving Roger the disconcerting impression that there really was no ceiling in the place-- just a great, black void suspended a few feet above their heads. Scanning the shelves, he saw that nothing was labeled and he wondered how it was possible that the Administration could find anything. For a second he had the oddest notion that the tapes were all the same, simple countless copies of the same topic. He hadn't been hurt so far; no one had threatened or beaten him, there had been no hint at behavior modification and he was starting to think that, in terms of the bad things that supposedly could happen to a person, brainwashing was nothing but one of the more vicious rumors. And beyond that, or perhaps a prison sentence, what could happen?

Roger looked around with nervous curiosity. His fear had finally receded enough so that he tried to take stock of his situation. There was nothing here, Roger decided warily, that could bother him, at least not immediately. The one thing that did strike him as a little odd was a metal door behind him slightly off to his right, although he didn't know why the sight of the plain black door should disturb him so. There was nothing to see about it beyond the opaqued glass window across which were printed black block letters that read simply: CUTTING ROOM

"This way, Mr Nadab," Thayer said. The older man headed toward the podium and Roger followed obediently, the guard so close behind him that Roger thought the guy might even be monitoring his prisoner's heartbeat. The podium might have been a block away or a quarter-mile; Roger couldn't tell. The rows of shelves seemed to engulf him and distort his sense of distance. When they finally reached their destination, he saw that it wasn't a podium at all but a small computer console set in a black plexiglass case. He looked around again and realized that they must be in the center of the room, because all the units seemed to branch from this location.

"Your social security number, Mr Nadab?" Thayer waited expectantly. His terror returned with sudden, startling force and Roger remained silent, incapable of speech even had he wanted to try. Thayer glanced at him in annoyance then nodded at the guard, who reached a hand into his jacket and drew out a notebook. This he handed to Thayer, and after quickly referring to a page inside, the Director was tapping the needed number into the keyboard. Roger watched with dread as each digit of his social security number appeared on the screen and Thayer pressed a key labeled LOCATE. The computer made a soft whirring sound for perhaps ten seconds, then the noise stopped and the screen went dark.

Behind the men a chain reaction of whispering noises began and the trio turned and watched as case after case of videotapes shifted smoothly along the

tracks
in the floor moving on nearly invisible wheels. The scene reminded Roger of those tiny plastic number puzzles that had once been sold in vending machines in restrooms, where the person struggled to put the numbers in order by pushing the little squares around. The movement seemed to drag on impossibly but Roger realized it was only apprehension causing his mind to turn each minute into a quarter hour. The shifting stopped abruptly and Roger realized with surprise that to his left a whole new corridor had been created within the maze of shelves. It stretched away into what would have been blackness had not a single videotape at its end pulsed with horrid red light. Thayer strolled down the new passageway and Roger and the guard followed; with each footfall Roger's foreboding built until his stomach was a churning bowl of acid and his legs were weak and barely cooperative. By the time he watched Virgil Thayer pluck the tape from its highlighted slot, Roger was almost stumbling. The trip back was even worse. Thayer and the guard had to each take an arm to get him through the CUTTING ROOM door.

"Your little newspaper was quite an interesting read, Mr Nadab."
Roger was recovering on an uncomfortable wooden chair, much like the ones on which his students spent most of their days. The chair was facing a steel desk painted institutional gray, and behind it Director Thayer sat on a likewise gray chair. Behind Thayer rose an entire wall of dials and knobs, slots and blinking multi-colored lights with digital counters. In the midst of it all was a large television screen, now dark. "You have some very... pointed opinions about the New Age Commonwealth and its Administration. As I recall you used the word 'censorship' quite frequently."
"Yes!" In spite of his fear, the old outrage took over and the word blurted from Roger's mouth. "You have no right--"
Thayer held up a hand, stopping him. "I am not here to debate the policies of the Administration with you, nor to persuade you that the Commonwealth's methodologies are correct. I'm quite sure that in a short while you will convince yourself that our way is, if not to your liking, at least preferable."
From the pocket of his suit jacket Thayer produced the videotape he had taken from the shelf a few minutes earlier and held it up casually, then rotated it so that Roger could see his own social security number pressed along its spine. A pulse began to jump in his throat as Roger watched the dull black square of plastic turn. Virgil Thayer smiled, and his teeth were impossibly perfect. "This is your life, Mr Nadab."
In one smooth motion, Thayer spun his chair and jammed the tape into one of the slots in the wall of machinery behind the desk. An instant later the

television

screen brightened, then began flashing Roger's social security number, name, address, work address-- finally rolling a litany of information top to bottom on

the screen, far too fast for anyone to read. Suddenly it stopped and the word "Pause" blinked in the top left corner, followed by "Press Play to Continue". Thayer hit a black button next to the screen without hesitation.

Silent scenes from his life blazed into light on the television and Roger watched in disbelief as he saw himself, twenty pounds lighter and gangly in a high school basketball uniform, his youthful face unsure but sincere as he asked

a seventeen-year-old girl named Miriam for a date.

More soundless shots of he and Miriam as they went through school, in the park,

in class, at the drive-in. He sucked in his breath as the holder of the unseen

camera panned a clearing in Brewer's Woods and showed an unobstructed view of the beater he had driven throughout his senior year, its windows heavily fogged.

The night of his and Miriam's senior prom-- how well he remembered it.

The unknown voyeur sped on: their wedding, the move into their first apartment,

buying their first home, even a close-up of his perspiring, hopeful face during

his teaching interview four years ago. By the time the tape had given him a sliver of each of the dozens of visits he and Miriam had made to the fertility

specialists, Roger was too stunned to be embarrassed as he saw his wife with her

legs spread in the delivery room, giving birth at last to their son amid sweat

and sweet agony.

The last scene on the tape was a shot of the three of them, performing the mundane yet precious act of grocery shopping at the supermarket just a few weeks

earlier.

As soon as it stopped, Thayer slapped a finger on the button and the tape slid

partway from its slot with a quiet whirrr.

"Censorship, Mr Nadab, can be applied to many things in many ways. What you have

probably never considered is just how far-reaching its implications can be. There are also many terms that can be used to define the concept, and a few that

you might find in any given dictionary would be 'excise', 'delete', or even 'purge'." Director Thayer pulled Roger's tape from the slot, rolled his chair two feet to the right and inserted it quickly into another opening, this one framed by a row of digital counters and a red button labeled PROCESS.

"The New Age Commonwealth prefers the much more neutral term of 'edit', Mr Nadab. While it is quite impossible to allow your infractions to go unpunished,

we do not condone the use of violence, or even its threat. We do, however, believe that you should be made to realize that what we think is best for the people of this great nation to think or do, is best." Roger found himself unable

to move as Thayer leaned forward and calmly folded his hands on the desktop.

"I'm afraid it has become necessary to edit a part of your life, Mr Nadab. Given

the difficulty of what must be done, the Administration has found it best to maintain a diplomatic point of view. It is, therefore, your choice."

"What?" Roger asked. "I'm not sure I understand--"
Thayer sighed and Roger thought dazedly that the exasperated look on the Director's face was probably much like the one on his own as he tried to explain something to an underachieving student.
"One of the two important people in your life is to be edited. It only remains for you to tell us which one."
"Edited?" Roger realized his voice had climbed at least two octaves. "You mean murdered!"
"Not at all," the other man explained impatiently. "No one's going to be murdered, just... erased." Thayer sat up abruptly and threw up his hands. "I've no more time to spend with you, Mr Nadab. You will have to make your choice now. There are other... projects that require my attention. Your wife or your son, one or the other." Thayer looked at him.
Roger opened his mouth but nothing would come out and his lips fumbled helplessly around his teeth. Could they really do this?
"If you don't choose, Mr Nadab," Thayer said softly, "we'll have no alternative but to edit both of them."
"Oh, I can't," Roger whispered brokenly. "I-- my son--"
"Nonsense, Mr Nadab," Thayer said cheerfully. His finger found the PROCESS button with terrifying speed.
"You'll forget the boy in no time at all."

Roger discovered his wife standing outside the spare room, staring into it with a black, longing look on her face. Somehow the Administration had managed to alter the physical shape of his and Miriam's life as it intertwined, although the room that had been Brian's nursery was still there, of course, and the tangible shape of their home remained the same. But this was no longer a toddler's room; the stuffed animals and airplane mobile were gone, replaced by boxes of junk and a sewing machine, all manner of crafts and odds and ends. It had become the typical extra bedroom and Roger knew that if he looked in their attic storage area he would find it empty of everything save his old and perpetually flat-tired bicycle.
He thought that at least they might be able to have another child; while he would still have two-year-old Brian if he had chosen Miriam, he knew that after a couple of months he would begin to wonder who the boy's mother had been and what had happened to her. Brian would have meant a lifetime of unanswered questions-- how could Roger spend the rest of his years wondering why a faceless, nameless woman had gone away?
He looked at Miriam and felt her hate at what he had done, what he had caused.
But like everything that had been taken or censored or forbidden, the memory would fade, and probably sooner than expected. Today her loss was still fresh and bleeding in her heart and Miriam despised him; next week she would look at him with disappointment and perhaps a little irritation, and the memory of their son would bring a bittersweet lump to her throat.

By the end of the month it would be, for both of them, as if their child, their son, had never existed. And they would forget. And neither would miss what they had once known...

Afterword

Inspiration for "The Cutting Room" came from an article I read in TV Guide Magazine (at least I think that was it -- it's been quite a long time) about, of all people, Carol Burnett. At the time, I'd been invited to submit a fiction piece to Barry Hoffman for the first issue of Gauntlet, a magazine on censorship. I didn't have any ideas, and the line that jumpstarted the story from the article was something about so much of the footage ending up "on the cutting room floor." I started thinking about what would happen if people had to suffer through having pieces of their lives "cut out," and "The Cutting Room" finally took shape.

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- stories - Zachary's Glass Shoppe; I Know What To Do
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Elsewhere on the web:

Yvonne's web site, Darke Palace, has all the usual book info and a full bibliography. But there's more: skydiving photos, art gallery and -- for the

Christmas of 1997 -- even a festive dog...

In her "spare time", Yvonne runs a small web site design company, Webette Designs.

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top of page

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