

The Nanny

A Gladys Briggs Short Story

by

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1966

The sharp, shrill ring of the telephone cut through the Sunday afternoon ease of the sleepy seaside suburb. Gladys Briggs, up to her elbows in weeds, looked up as her daughter Katherine appeared at the back door, indicating the telephone was theirs.

Gladys sprang to her feet, pulling off her gloves, dusting down the knees of her red slacks that were the scandal of Acacia Avenue, as she hurried to the back door. Katherine, not the brightest of children, had to be shooed out of her way as Gladys attempted to enter their Victorian villa, and dash through to the kitchen. As she had suspected it was the green telephone, not the black one her husband had had installed when they first moved in; this one had been there waiting for them, and Charlie had had no say in the matter.

Flinging her gloves down on the table, Gladys lifted the receiver, leaned a hip against the kitchen cupboards and said lightly, "Go ahead caller." She glared at Katherine and tossed her head in the direction of the stairs. Katherine, perennially curious about the green telephone, dragged her feet until Gladys threw a tea towel at her and she darted away, her feet thumping on the stairs.

"We have a call waiting to connect, London SW1."

"I'll take the call," Gladys replied, checking the conveniently placed series of mirrors that showed her Katherine closing her bedroom door behind her.

There was a crackle and hiss as the line was connected, and the hoarse tones of a cigar-smoking, ex-military-man-turned-civil-servant barked at her, "Nanny?! Is that you?!"

"Speaking," Gladys replied, annoyed at the Major's unnecessarily brusque manner.

"Good. How's the weather up there in jolly old Bickering?"

"There's a light easterly blowing in, but it should be fine later," she replied giving her all clear code.

“Excellent,” the Major replied, “Nanny? Got a little job for you. Right up your alley. Bit of a tough nut to crack. The other boys here can’t make anything of him, but I think he’d do well under your... uh... care. We’re sending him up in the car. Usual place. Might take a while, but we are under something of a deadline. He has ‘exams’ at the end of the week. We’d like him to be ready before then if possible.”

“Will I have sole charge of his care?”

“We’re sending a specialist tutor, but he’ll be under your direction. You’ve worked with him before: The Housemaster.”

“Lovely,” Gladys replied, “Any specialist instructions from the parents?”

“Only to emphasise the urgency of the matter. Methodology is at your discretion. The parents are only concerned with the end results.”

“I see. And when should I be ready?”

“We’ll send the car for you in two hours. Will that be enough time to make the necessary arrangements?”

“Well, if you are sending the car, it will have to do. Won’t it, Major?”

Gladys smiled with satisfaction as she heard the deep unease in the Major’s sudden clearing of the throat and the awkward silence. She let it linger. After all, this was the first she was hearing of the job. Two hours was enough time to pack a suitcase – there was one permanently filled with essentials, ready under her side of the bed, that she could toss a few things into – and talk Charlie through Katherine’s weekly schedule of school, Brownies and dance lessons. She had it written down already, but Charlie always felt nervous until she had talked him through it – he didn’t like feeling he might let Kath down if he got it wrong.

“You’ll have a few hours with the client file prior to arrival,” the Major tentatively offered, “I’ll make sure there’s a case of the usual on the transport.”

“Thank you Major,” Gladys’s smile broadened, “I look forward to it.”

Gladys pulled the collar of her coat up around her neck and, as the car door opened, swung both legs out of the car, knees together.

“Marm.”

She took the hand that was offered her and stood up, tucking the strap of her handbag in to the crook of her arm, feeling a familiar sense of cold authority settle about her.

“I’ll get the bags, Marm.”

“Thank you, Michael. Have the client files arrived?”

“By special courier an hour ago. Your eyes only I’m afraid so I’ve nothing to give you by way of a precis.”

“Station was given no indication?”

“Station was told to expect a delivery. Station was told to collect Nanny. End of message.” Michael replied, slamming down the boot and lifting her case and vanity, “Shall we, Marm?”

Gladys gestured that she would follow him, as one might follow a bellhop at the Savoy. Michael was one to observe the formalities and Gladys found it delightfully incongruous that the tall, blonde twenty-something should do so in the middle of a wood, in the middle of the night. Dressed in his driver’s black uniform, he faded neatly into their surroundings.

The Ice House, part of the old Bickering Hall estate, awaited them, its lichen stained exterior utterly belying its true function. The War Ministry had been delighted to discover the hidden network of caves and tunnels that the Hall’s original owner had utilised in his rather profitable career as a privateer. Indeed, Gladys had been part of the team that had run Bickering Station in the closing stages of the War. She had been 15 – having lied through her teeth and rather masterfully doctored numerous documents (which had led to her first promotion upon discovery of her true age) – and a quick study. When Charlie was invalided home and liked the look of jolly old Bickering on Sea, Gladys had delighted the Ministry by staying in the area and becoming a permanent member of Bickering Station – or The Nursery.

Michael shoved open the door and swung himself and the bags inside, past the detritus expected of a rundown outhouse. Gladys followed and, with a gloved hand, pulled the door shut behind them; Michael would move the car once she was settled. They had driven the black car up the hill and through the wood without lights, as one of the Ministry cars had pulled out in front of them, lights ablaze, to suggest that Gladys Briggs had left Bickering on Sea on another little nannying job (“How does her husband cope without her? That poor little Katherine left without her mother...”).

“Yevgenny was putting the kettle on as I left so there should be a decent brew waiting for you, Marm.” Michael opened a door in the back wall, revealing a small cubicle, into which he stepped, setting the bags down at his feet. Gladys stepped in behind him and Michael closed the door, “The client file was taken straight to the Reading Room.”

Gladys’s heart always lurched whenever the platform jolted into life. As they began to descend she saluted briefly at the camera in the ceiling above them.

“I’ll take my tea there. I want a full inventory list as well as a systems check. This is priority one. The Ministry are expecting results.”

“Very good, Marm. Do you want the tweed or the blue and whites?”

“Blue and whites, I think. The Ministry boys got nowhere so we haven’t got time to be subtle.”

“Right you are Marm.”

The platform continued to descend.

“Marm?”

“Yes, Michael?”

“Might I observe? I’ve completed the full manual of techniques and passed my 902.”

“With flying colours as I recall,” Gladys considered, “I’d like you to assist. The Housemaster will be joining us, but I think you would benefit from the practical application.”

“Thank you Marm,” Michael grinned.

“Get yourself an orderly’s uniform and bring your brew to the Reading Room in an hour. I should have a clearer picture by then.”

The platform ground to a halt and white strip lighting spilled out of the gap between the parting brick panels as they slid aside.

Gladys removed her gloves as she stepped off the platform into the polished concrete corridor and smiled to the Eastern European gentleman seated at the reception desk.

“Yevgenny. Any closer to finishing?”

“I think I have read the same chapter three times,” the man replied as Gladys scribbled her signature on the clipboard he handed her, “Still, I not understand this Mr Darcy. Why he tell his friend not marry one sister, but ask other to marry him? It make no sense.”

“The English upper-class gentleman Yevgenny. You’re right: they make no sense. But if they did,” Gladys smiled conspiratorially as she handed the clipboard to Michael for him to sign, “then we would be out of job.”

“Yes Marm.”

They all grinned.

“You’ll have to try Mr Rochester next,” Gladys told Yevgenny as she picked her gloves off his desk, “I’ll be fascinated to hear what you think.”

“In time you’ll find your own technique – something that works for you,” Gladys reassured Michael as she gathered up the files from the Reading Room desk, “For now, observe, take note, and follow our direction. The Housemaster has developed and refined his technique over several decades. Don’t be afraid to take your lead from him. If he catches a scent I’ll let him run with it. He’s a good nose for knowing when the brink is approaching, especially with these boarding school boys. I’ll hang back and bring in the big guns at the end. This could all be over very quickly if we play it right.”

“Yes Marm. And, thank you Marm.”

“You’ll find your feet. I think you know this, but your work as a fixer is invaluable and you’ve a certain flair for it. This particular aspect of the job may not be your forte but I think you’ve got what it takes and some good instincts. You’ll certainly be highly competent by the time Head Office finds you a permanent posting.”

“I’ve a good teacher Marm.”

“Well, that’s very kind of you to say, Michael. Now, off you pop and wait for our guest to arrive. I’ll need a little time.”

“Shall I buzz your dorm room when they’re here, Marm?”

“No, I’ll be in the office. Have the Housemaster meet me there. You and Yevgenny can take our guest down to his quarters.”

“Right you are, Marm.”

Gladys stood up, her coat and a garment bag over one arm, files tucked into the other. Michael stood also, and they both left the Reading Room. She locked the door behind them and nodded to him as he set off back down the labyrinthine corridors towards Reception. After noting that the orderly's uniform marked out Michael's distinctly callipygian form, Gladys set off in the opposite direction for her office.

Once inside she flung down the files, and hung up the coat and garment bag on the back of the door. She unzipped the bag and studied the blue and white uniform inside. Crisp, neat and Victorian in cut, the uniform glared back at her with humourless authority, and Gladys smiled. Yevgenny was something of an artist with an iron. Not exactly what she had expected when she had interrogated the Russian submariner twenty years ago, but, as he had pointed out after she had recruited him for The Nursery – some six months after his defection and his 'granny' had settled into her little cottage in Bickering on Sea's old town – submariners were trained to excellence in all things.

Satisfied that all was in order, she moved back to the desk and neatly set out the files she intended to use, and picked up the *Eyes Only* file to lock it into her secure file in the safe behind her desk chair. The chair was a magnificent monstrosity of leather and mahogany, but it was comfortable and had been a kind thought of dear Winston in recognition of a job well done. The chair had followed her from office to office in the bunker and now fitted in neatly with the décor of the Station Commander's office. It made up for the lack of view.

The green intercom box on her desk buzzed and she buzzed back using one of the switches on top of it. She turned to one of the small boxy television screens below the safe and switched it on, seating herself in the desk chair.

As the screen warmed, the pictured faded into clarity, the pixels coalescing into six masculine figures in Reception. Yevgenny was handling the paperwork and Michael could be seen leading three figures off to the secure lift down to the guest quarters. One of the figures appeared slumped between the other two, not dejected but exhausted. Shadows on his face told some of the story of what he had already endured.

Picking up a pen, Gladys scribbled a few quick notes on a pad and laid the pen down thoughtfully. The sixth figure was finishing up with Yevgenny: Housemaster. They were probably catching up. Tony would be giving him a few titles to add to his reading list. She watched as the two shook hands and, turning the way Yevgenny pointed, Tony set off down the corridor, saluting at

the camera as he passed – saluting her.

They hadn't worked together for some time, and Gladys wasn't entirely sure how she felt about seeing him. Last time had been awkward and it had delayed things with the job they'd been working. They'd talked it out one night over a bottle from the case the Ministry had sent and come to an understanding. It hadn't been working for a woman – Tony had never had much problem with that. It had been working for a woman he had broken promise with. She had laughed, told him about Charlie, that she was relieved he hadn't gone through with it, and that Katherine was on her way. After that the job had gone swimmingly. Fourteen hours later they'd had the job done.

She reached over and switched on another screen in the bank below the first; Michael could be seen with the two minders, removing their guest's stainless-steel accessories.

Tony's familiar sharp knock came from the door and she called, "Come."

He came in grinning and she knew instantly that it would be fine, "Hello Old Girl. How's tricks?"

"All is well in the garden," she replied, "And you?"

"Can't complain." He stuck his hands in his pockets and continued to grin at her, "Quite the cushy number you've got here. All these young men hanging on your every word. Must be good for the ego."

"As you say," she returned his grin with a smile, "one cannot complain."

She gestured to one of the chairs on the other side of her desk and Tony unpocketed his hands, undid his jacket button and sat, crossing his right leg over his left.

"You've had a read? Know what we're up against?"

"I've had a chance to digest. I thought we'd start with a few hours of Nursery welcoming protocols-"

"Sleep deprivation, tapes of babies crying for hours on end."

"That's the one. Couple of school bells thrown in at periodic intervals in hours three and four. Just as they're dropping off to sleep. Takes them right back."

"That's a nice touch. Taking them right back to the dorm room for those milliseconds when they wake. I'll have to remember that."

“Well, it all helps. We’ve been refining since last you were here. I thought we’d send you in after that. Full Housemaster. Go as full on as you like. Michael will follow your lead. He’s good at improv, though a little green yet. Still training him up. More of a field officer I think, but interrogation technique will stand him in good stead. He’s keen to learn and takes direction well. Did quite well at Sandhurst for a scholarship boy.”

“One of your spots?”

“His file passed my desk. The army were going to side line him for the heinous crime of being working class. I thought he was worth a little more.”

“The army’s loss is clearly our gain,” Tony tipped an invisible hat to her and she allowed herself a smile, “What about you? You coming in all guns blazing?”

“I thought a couple days in your tender care, and after that we’ll reassess. I don’t want to come in too soon. These boarding school posh boys can tough it out but they all reach their breaking point.”

“At which point Nanny makes it all better.”

“Oh no, not this one. I think Nanny’s going to be very, very disappointed.”

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Three days later...

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“He’s nearing the edge. I can feel it.” Michael said with a sliver of wonder in his voice. Gladys remembered that feeling, the shock of realising that one had stripped away the armour of another person and brought them to the brink, so that it was a tangible, physical tension in the air. That kind of power was intoxicating, addictive to some. She had come to make her peace with it, with the side of her that could thrill at that. Nanny was a uniform, a persona she could put on and take off at will, but there was that thread of her in Gladys, that had come from the same woman who played with Katherine in the garden, went for long walks with Charlie on the promenade, lay beside him at night.

“He is,” Tony agreed, “This is the critical point.”

They were all sat in Gladys’s office, watching Schoolboy on the monitor. They had taken to calling him that after Tony’s first session and it had stuck.

It helped to maintain the distance. It almost made him one of them, part of the game. He had a codename same as them. He was just another player in the grand game.

“Because we don’t want to shatter him.” Michael’s statement had the rising terminal of a question about it. Tony grinned at him approvingly, “Yes. We’re just opening the floodgates. Letting him take the first few steps towards unburdening himself.”

“So, what’s next?”

“She’s next.” Tony replied, a calculating smile on his lips as he watched the screen, “The disapproving nanny. More shaming than Mummy, more terrifying than Papa or any school master. Nanny is the one person they all silently cry out for in the night, tucked up in their dorm rooms.”

Gladys considered the screen a moment and then met Tony’s gaze.

“Silent treatment, I think.”

“Masterful.” Tony glowed with approval.

Gladys stood up and left to get changed. She saw Tony nudge Michael, and gesture the younger man to follow him, “This one calls for the viewing window, Dear Boy. The screens simply won’t do it justice.”

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Gladys stood outside the guest room and settled herself. She straightened the blue uniform and adjusted the white apron, patting at the severe bun she had twisted her hair into. She felt a little exposed without her make-up but she closed her eyes, took a deep breath from her belly, and then another. She listened to her own heartbeat, thinking back, letting Charlie, letting Katherine – even Yevgenny, Tony and Michael – all slip away from her. She let Gladys step through the same door and close and lock it behind her.

Then Nanny opened her eyes, straightened her back, gripped her file, and pursed her lips. She nodded to the minder on duty outside the guest room and he opened the door for her, cringing a little. She marched past him and into the room.

Nanny strode up to the table, the young man sat slumped, dejected and silently crying on the other side of it. Her movements precise, Nanny placed the file folder on the desk and sat in the other chair. She smoothed down her apron

and skirt. She opened the file folder. She took a pen from her breast pocket, checked the time on the watch pinned to the front of her uniform. She looked down at the first page of the file – a statement form – poised her pen to write and looked fixedly and expectant at the young man opposite her.

Still crying, he slowly lifted his gaze. He was holding himself, turned into the back of the chair, as if seeking its protection.

She held his gaze and clicked the end of her pen, the nib stabbing out, the double click of the mechanism making the young man flinch.

The tension held. Held... Held...

Silence became the third person in the room, a disapproving interloper that began to burn up the oxygen in the room.

The young man cried harder, his composure crumbling, and Nanny saw her moment.

“Name.”

He answered. She wrote.

“Occupation.”

He answered. She wrote. He sighed.

And slowly at first, then in a flood, it all came tumbling out.

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Gladys stepped out of the guest room and stopped. The door closed behind her and she let all of the tension flood out of her. Tears sprang to her eyes as a tumult of emotion washed over her. Eyes closed she heard Tony, his voice muffled by the Observation Room, telling Michael to wait a few moments, let her catch her breath.

The lad had broken quickly. She had seen the relief of speaking, of letting go of all those secrets, overtake the horror of self-incrimination. She was certain that after four hours of unbroken confession she had it all out of him. The next part would be up to Whitehall. A van would come for the boy and she would never see him again. That was how it always went.

She opened her eyes as she heard the Observation Room door open and Tony stepped out, hand extended toward her, “Masterful as ever, Old Girl. One word. One word and you had him spill the lot. They’ll have you on the Honours

List for this one.”

“I’m not sure the Major could justify the addition of a Ministry of Defence caretaker to the Honours, but I’ll take the sentiment.”

“Honestly Old Girl, outstanding job. None better.”

“Thank you, Tony. Come on. There’s that case from the Major to open. I need a drink.”

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