

GREYZONED



Lisa Jade

This was my first round entry into the NYC Midnight Short
Story Challenge, 2016.

I was tasked with writing a maximum 2500 word short story
with the following details:

Genre: Suspense

Character: A Nanny

Theme: A condemned apartment building

Synopsis: Moral responsibility has split society into three
regions.

Sometimes these borders are breached.

“The roof’s leaking again.”

Anne looked up at the ceiling, frowning at the brown patch forming there. The whole apartment building stank of mould; she pulled her scarf over her mouth to try and muffle the scent.

Beside her, Thomas swayed on the balls of his feet. Dark, clever eyes followed Anne’s movements, traced the lines of her body, watched the wiggle in her hips as she walked. He adjusted his tie and coughed.

“Don’t worry. I’ll sort it out with the repair guys. Besides, don’t you have somewhere to be?”

She hesitated.

“I suppose I do. But I’d rather not.”

Thomas raised an eyebrow. It was unlike Anne to be so unhappy. Those normally eager eyes seemed dull and disinterested – he shuffled closer and placed a large hand on her arm.

“Is it Jack?”

The name alone set her on edge. Immediately her knuckles turned white as she clenched them desperately at her sides. She could hear her pulse in her ears.

Nevertheless, she seemed nonchalant as she waved him away.

“No. I mean, yes, I won’t lie. He makes me nervous. But I’m sure I can deal with it.”

“Just don’t let him get to you. You’re not here for the Condemned. You’re here for the kid.”

Anne nodded, but something was still gnawing away in the back of her mind. Thomas gave a small wave before scarping. She couldn't blame him; he wanted to be there even less than she did.

It was only once he had vanished round the corner that Anne felt something twist in her gut.

The building was ramshackle at best. Nearly every apartment was filled, every wooden door sealed with a half-dozen deadbolts on the outside. Within, they screamed.

It was never all of them, and never at the same time, but they did scream a lot. It used to frighten her once, used to reduce her to a sobbing mess in the hallway – but years and experience had hardened her. The sound of fists against doors and walls no longer fazed her. The enforcement of locks and bars and stringent curfews meant nothing to her now.

As she passed the door to room 308, its inhabitant threw their full weight into the door. It creaked, but held. Somehow, unbidden, she found herself scowling at the door, snarling at the thought of the Condemned inside.

Technically speaking, the Condemned were not criminals. Criminals were black-zoned, imprisoned or executed. They were of no consequence to her – or the rest of Polite Society.

But the Condemned? They were different. They were not technically criminals, but were dubbed too dangerous for the Society and Greyzoned, held under a different kind of lock and key. As far as Anne was concerned, they were scum. She stole a glance at her watch. 19:00. Nearly time for curfew. Things would be getting loud soon.

The walk to room 450 was long and unnerving – and as she rapped her knuckles smartly on the door, there was a sense of growing dread in her chest. As a psychologist she could deal with a lot from the

Condemned – but there was no denying it. The man behind the door terrified her.

Someone clattered from within the apartment, and she quickly tugged down her skirt and tucked a loose strand of hair into her bun. There was never any telling what could set Jack off, and she had to be ready to run.

But then the door opened, and a small boy emerged. He looked Anne up and down and his face broke into a smile.

“Nanny! Why are you here?”

She found herself smiling back as she embraced the boy; regardless of the fear that gripped her in this place, Luke was always a joy.

“I’m just visiting, dear. I need to speak with your daddy. How is everything?”

She reached out and softly wiped some muck from his cheek.

“I’m okay. It was loud last night, so I’m sleepy.”

Loud last night, she thought. It’s always loud here. She found herself desperately wishing for the solitude of her downtown apartment, the sight of fresh cut flowers and the scent of camomile. But this place was dank and dirty, and stank of rot and sweat.

“Well, I suppose you’re going to bed early then,” she teased as they walked into the apartment.

Apartment 450. Her fingers shook at the mere thought of being there. Anne had never thought herself a coward – but being trapped there with the scum of the earth was more than she could bear.

As if on cue, something huge and hairy lumbered from the bedroom. The man was tall and broad, and covered in thick black hair everywhere but his head. Anne noticed that he was undressed again, only scarcely covered by the stained underwear he wore. She took care to avert her eyes as she greeted him.

“Evening, Jack. How are you?”

The man simply glared in response. Anne fought the urge to turn away, to pull back her outstretched hand. It was confidential, the misdeeds of each Condemned – but it was clear to her that whatever Jack had done, he would do it again. The look he fixed her with was one of pure loathing. Beady eyes fixed her in their sight, and yellowing teeth bared themselves at her in a growl.

“What do you want?”

“Luke, bed please,” she said softly.

“But-“

“Now, young man. I need to speak with your daddy.”

Anne sat down at the table, reaching into her bag and pulling out a book. In here was every psychological evaluation of Luke since birth. Every misbehaviour, every positive act. Every crayon drawing he’d ever done. Luke’s entire personality was spread out across the battered table for Jack to see.

Despite the title of Nanny, it was clear to anyone that Anne wasn’t the maternal type. She was a psychologist – and her role could not have been clearer.

“Luke’s tenth birthday is coming up,” she said. Jack’s hands tightened against the edge of the table.

“You think I don’t know that?”

“That’s not what I said, Jack. But you know what else is coming up, yes?”

He fixed her with a hateful glare.

“Yeah. You’re gonna try and take him away from me.”

She released a long, slow breath, cupping her hands in front of her. Her fingers were still shaking. The motion was uncontrollable, and she could only hope he didn’t notice.

“At ten, all the children of the Condemned are given their final evaluation. As long as the results are favourable, they’ll be released. And I’m happy to say...”

She puffed up her chest suddenly, unable to disguise her pride. It had been a long road, but finally the end was in sight for both of them.

“... Luke is a wonderful boy. He’s shown next to no questionable tendencies in all the time I’ve known him. I’m certain that things will go well and he will be returned to Polite Society next week.”

Jack didn’t respond. That steely glare was fixed on her as he stood upright, turning away towards the kitchen. Instinctively, Anne tensed.

“You people really think it’s going to be that easy?” asked Jack, setting his jaw, “that I’ll just hand over my son to you, no questions asked?”

“I understand that it’s hard, Jack. But there’s no doubt about it – Polite Society will take Luke in and care for him in a way you’re simply not able to.”

“What did you say?”

He rounded on her, his eyes taking in every detail of her appearance. To him, she was just a speck. A tiny wide-eyed brat who knew nothing of the world she claimed to understand. To her, he was a brute.

The two did not see eye to eye.

“I raise my son perfectly fine,” he snarled. Suddenly, Anne felt exposed. She grabbed her file-o-fax and stood, holding it between them like she thought it might stop the two-hundred-fifty pound man from charging.

“I know you do. But you know this is better for him.”

He advanced on her, stopping an arm’s reach away. There was something about him; about the way he held himself, about the intensity

and anger in his eyes, that seemed to embody her fears. The Condemnation programme had been in play for several years, and she knew his type. Big and angry and vicious. Like an uncontrolled dog. He was the very image of all she hated, all she looked down on. It didn't make her a snob, she insisted; it was simply the result of social cleansing.

“I shouldn't be here anyway,” he growled, “let alone him.”

“Jack. Crime has reduced drastically since the programme was put into place. Those who live in Polite Society are happier than ever. When I take Luke-“

“If you take him.”

She fixed him with a stern look.

“When I take him, he'll be provided for. No more curfews or cameras or deadbolts on the door. Just a normal, safe, happy life. Don't you think he deserves that?”

Jack took another step closer, and this time she stepped away. Her shoulders collided with the wall and for a moment the two stood frozen in the kitchen, him leaning over her, her fighting to meet his eyes.

“Jack. Step away from me.”

“You have no idea. You come swanning in here with your clever words and you act like you know better. The world isn't as black and white as you think. And I don't care how much red tape you throw my way...”

He leaned in again, one arm behind her now, so close that their noses almost touched. Anne couldn't breathe. Terror filled her. Her fingers shuddered against the kitchen cupboards. Her once-intelligent eyes threatened to roll back in her head, and it was all she could do not to break free and run. But she knew better. If she left, who knew what could happen to Luke.

“I will not let you take my son.”

Jack raised a hand, and slowly, purposefully, curled it into a fist. It was a calm, collected motion – and yet hellish to watch. Anne could feel her heartbeat in her throat. Her blood pumped so hot she feared it might break the skin.

“Jack. I’m warning you. Get off me. If you don’t, I’ll have no choice but to report you. You’ll be black-zoned.”

Something glinted in the corner of her eye – but he was faster than her. In a flash he had the knife, lifting it, raising it against her skin so close that she could feel the coldness of the blade. When he spoke, it was in a voice unlike anything she’d heard before. Beyond anger, beyond hate. It was something so intense she had no words for it.

“I don’t care anymore.”

“Anne, are you done in here yet?”

Thomas swung on the door frame as he slipped into the apartment. He ducked under the swinging, exposed bulb in the centre of the room, and eyed the papers on the table.

“Anne?”

Silence greeted him.

“Anne, where are you?”

He nudged open the door to the kitchen and promptly slipped on something crimson.

Anne sat on the kitchen floor, quaking, her face stained red. Something huge and hulking lay in front of her. A scabbed, bitten hand clutched what remained of a kitchen knife.

Thomas stumbled and fell back against the door, his leather shoes sliding on the bloody tiles.

“A-Anne! What... What...”

She could barely hear him. Could barely breathe as he staggered away. She rubbed a stained hand through her hair. Finally. The fear was gone.

“It’s okay. I... I feel much better now.”

Thomas watched her for a moment, unnerved by the way her lips curled in the corners, the way her eyes remained just a little too wide. Suddenly, he couldn’t bring himself to look for a moment longer.

It took Anne several minutes to realise that the door was locked. When she did, the fear grew rapidly. A gentle tap of the door became a slamming, both bloodied fists smashing into the wood so hard it hurt.

She hit harder and harder, until her knuckles split and the door threatened to give way. Around her, the others were kicking off again, and through the madness that clouded her mind she found herself screeching too. Her voice was raw and pained, and she threw her weight against the door as her cries fell into the cacophony of the screaming Condemned around her.