

Rebecca's Story

"No sleeping on the job, wake up you sleepy head."

Rebecca felt a nudge in her side. "Huh? What? Oh, sorry."

She opened her eyes to see a young man with short dark hair that fell loosely around his head in big curly wisps. His eyes were dark brown, and he had remarkable dimples when he smiled. He wore a white apron covered with blood, like a butcher would wear.

She closed her eyes and turned away from him saying, "Stuff it George. You know how tired I am, let me sleep a bit."

"Sorry," he apologized, "I would have, but I thought you should know. They're questioning him again."

"About what?" she asked, "About why he is a better surgeon than the rest of them?"

"That's just it. They've been observing him all week and they've determined that he is not a better surgeon, yet his results are so extraordinary."

She lifted herself from the small cot and crossed the room to the mirror. She poured fresh water into the bowl and splashed some in her face. She stared at her reflection and saw a tired girl with light blue eyes and long red hair dangling from a plain white cap. Her eyebrows were so light and thin that you could hardly see them.

She rolled up her fists and slammed them onto the table before speaking, "It was that bastard Dr. Bernard. He thought he was the golden boy the moment he arrived. He's been jealous ever since."

"No doubt," George replied, "and his record is probably below average too. But he is rich and he knows people. He could probably arrange to transfer surgeons to other units until he was the best of the compound. But he just can't fathom what your Dr. Westin has done, nobody can."

"Why? Because our patients live?"

"Yes, Rebecca, because your patients live. All of them live. The other surgeons are hacking off legs and arms, and still many of them don't survive, but yours all recover with their limbs intact. It's not natural."

Rebecca drew a deep breath in and asked, "You? You too think it is unnatural? You would prefer that some of our patients died? Why can't everyone just appreciate the fact that we are saving our soldiers? Isn't it a good thing that we send our men home on their feet instead of sticking them in the ground?"

"Oh sure," he said, "sure, it's good to save the boys, but why can't he share his secret with us so we can do the same?"

"He has. He shared all his techniques. It's not his fault if they can't do it as well as him."

"That doesn't work. They are good doctors. Something is going on here in this tent that they can't replicate."

Tears gathered in her eyes as she felt the trust of her friend slip away. "So you assume it must be unholy?" she asked, "Maybe it's something holy!"

"If it's holy, then why can't Dr. Pearl do the same? He is an ordained minister as well as a surgeon. If anyone should have a holy connection, 'tis him."

She turned away from her friend. The tears in her eyes leaked out onto her cheeks. "What will they do with him?"

"I don't know. I need to go change some bandages. We'll speak on this again."

Rebecca took a deep breath. She needed to free her mind from all her fears and tend her own patients. She looked back into the mirror again. Her face looked tired. Dark spots were forming under her eyes. She cupped her hands together and scooped up some more water from the bowl and dipped her face into it. The water rinsed the tears from her face and felt cool and refreshing. She straightened up and adjusted the dress she wore. Rebecca frowned at the sight of her rumpled shift, and reached under her vest to pull the wrinkles out. She pulled her cap off her head and tried vainly, and unsuccessfully to pull a brush through her hair. Disgusted with what she saw, she rolled her hair and wrapped it in a net that held it in place under her cap. Small ringlets of red hair poked out from under the cap and curled down her cheek. She liked the curls. Next to the water was a stack of fresh aprons. She pulled off the top one and slipped it over her head, wrapped the cords twice around her waist and

tied the knots in front of her. The aprons were supposed to be white, but after so much use, even with bleaching they still showed faded traces of blood.

When Rebecca exited the tent, she had to shield her eyes from the sun. She guessed it was around ten in the morning. The sun reflected brightly off the snow pack. As her eyes adjusted, she started to trudge through the trampled snow to the infirmary. No matter how much snow fell at night, it never remained white within the compound itself. Foot traffic, horses, and wagons repeatedly cut into the snow and stirred up bits of mud from below. The snow in front of the infirmary would frequently be mottled with blood which would be bright red at first, and eventually dry to a dark brown which would blend into the reddish clay color brought up from below.

She crossed the compound to the front of the infirmary, put on her best smile, and popped in. "Good morning boys, how are we feeling this morning?"

"Much better," said one, "thank you, ma'am."

"Me too," said another, "I feel like I'll be up and about in no time."

"Is it true, what they say?" asked a third.

Rebecca looked at the last boy "Forgive me, is what true? What are they saying?"

The boy looked barely seventeen. He pushed himself up in his bed, "Well I hear that the Doc was in league with some witches and used unholy powers to heal us all. To be honest, I don't care if he made a pact with Beelzebub himself, but ole Blanchard there," he pointed his thumb to indicate the scowling figure in the corner behind him, "he says we're all going to hell for this, but I don't see's how doing a good deed could ever be mixed up with the Devil."

"Ye mark me words," the cowering figure said from the corner where he eavesdropped on every conversation, "Tis the devil's work. We were all marked for death, and now we are just the devil's pawns."

"Mr. Blanchard," Rebecca stood up tall so all could see and hear her, "Don't you think the devil would revel in your wounds and misery rather than aid in your recovery? Seems to me he'd be after your souls and not your flesh."

A commotion brewed up from the other side of the tent. Rebecca heard her friend George raise his voice, "Rebecca, look out, I couldn't stop them all!" She turned and saw the angry patient hobbling towards her. His right leg was a bloody mess. The blackened foot already showed signs of gangrene. He didn't use the leg and instead, leaned heavily on a single crutch.

He went straight to Blanchard and said, "Why don't you stop your damn whining and carrying about. You've got all your fingers and toes, yet you're complaining about how healthy you are? How many of us would like to carry that burden for you! I expect I'll be losing my leg tomorrow. I tell you now, I'd trade with anyone of you that's unhappy with living."

He tried raising his crutch to point at them, but instead started to fall. Rebecca caught him before he had completely lost his balance. She held him up on his left leg long enough for George to come and take the place of the crutch.

Rebecca felt for him. Losing a leg was a tragedy. "What's your name soldier?"

"Patrick Thomson, Ma'am."

"I'll include you in my prayers, Patrick Thomson."

"Thank you, Ma'am."

George turned him around and started guiding him back to his cot, "Come on now Pat, me boy, stop flirting with the beautiful Miss Rebecca. I saw her first. How am I supposed to catch her eye if you swoon her with your sad story?"

Patrick tried to chuckle, as they made their way across the tent, but all he managed to get out was a wince.

Rebecca felt a hand on her shoulders, she spun her head around and saw it was her Doctor Westin. "Oh, good God, am I glad to see you, what happened?"

"It's not good. I think they're suspicions linger, but they let me practice because I am putting boys back on the front for them."

"There must be something we can do to prove that it's just providence and pure luck on our part."

The doctor shook his head, "I don't think so. I tried to explain to them that they just aren't giving me the most severe patients, but they claimed otherwise. I think the only thing that would satisfy them is for some of our patients to expire."

Rebecca gasped at that, "No! We couldn't."

“No. I wouldn’t do that to a healthy young boy, but maybe, next time they come in, you pick some of the worst ones, ones we can’t save, and just make their last hours more comfortable.”

“Oh, no doctor, I couldn’t.”

“You are kinder to these boys than any of the other nurses. I don’t think any of the surgeons here would do anything to endanger any of the patients, but I think they concentrate their efforts, as they should, on the wounded they can actually help. As a consequence, some of the patients they lose are just those boys they couldn’t help who just die in their cots. You would be doing them a service by making them more comfortable, and even just talking to them so they don’t die alone.”

She didn’t relish the thought of dealing with death or dying, but she felt for them and nodded her head in agreement, “Aye. I can do that.”

She bit her lip and thought about what lay ahead. It wouldn’t be long, most of their wounded came from the morning battles, and arrived shortly after they fed the current patients lunch. Fighting raged on through the afternoon, but those injured late in the day rarely survived the freezing night to be found in the morning.

Stewards brought lunch to the tent. Rebecca doled out portions for each patient in her care. Some might only get broth, while others might get some morsels of meat or vegetables. Nobody in the camp ate well, the officers included. Supplies were hard to come by. The camp was well fortified, surrounded on two sides by steep and treacherous hills, and thick forest on the other. Only one side was open, and it opened to the well-traveled road, but even in times of peace, a well-traveled road in the dead of winter was a difficult and slow journey. During war, supply shipments were a valued target and so a rare commodity out here.

As expected, shortly after lunch, the wounded started to arrive. First were wagons bearing men who couldn’t walk. The wagons were cargo wagons, built for hauling bales of hay, and not built for comfort. The driver’s seat, which could also accommodate one passenger, sat on springs, affording them some protection against the harsh roads, but the bed of the wagon did little to ease their journey. There was little the drivers could do to make the ride more comfortable, except for going slower, which was not in the best interest of the most serious wounded. Not all of the men in the wagons survive the trip. Less serious wounded would crowd into the remaining wagons, if any, often sitting around the edges with their feet dangling over the side. Those that could not fit on the wagon had to walk behind it, so these wagons were taken at a more leisurely pace, with a procession of wounded men following behind.

It was unfortunate, but unavoidable, that the men most vulnerable to the rough ride, had to endure the worst ride, but it did get them to the compound first, allowing the surgeons to get right to work with them before the others arrived.

At this time of year, the war only accounted for about half the injuries they needed to treat. Winter was credited with the rest. Many soldiers suffered frostbite, especially those that had to walk to the compound. There were even some soldiers that did not suffer wounds in the war, but had to report to the infirmary due to frostbite.

Rebecca was first out to receive the wounded. The wagon held ten men in two rows of five. She quickly checked off those that had died en route, leaving them in the hands of their chaplain Pastor Williams. Rebecca selected those she thought had lost the most blood, and indicated which ones she wanted the bearers to take to her area of the infirmary. George raised a curious eyebrow, this was certainly uncharacteristic for her, but it was certainly her right as much as his or anyone else’s.

Another wagon pulled up, and she was quick to board it and select the most serious chest wounds she could find. A thought festered in the back of her mind, what if Dr. Westin really was better than all the other doctors. If he spent all his time caring for mortally wounded men, then other men who they could have saved might get less adequate care from the other doctors, and either not survive, or not survive with all their limbs intact.

The final wagon pulled in, but George raced into it before Rebecca had climbed out of the second wagon, “Save some for us Becky.”

She had not intended on being so obvious, “I just didn’t want anyone accusing me of only selecting the easy cases for Dr. Westin.”

George had never told her that he selected the easy ones and left the obviously mortal wounds for her. As the thought crossed his mind, he realized that he had never noticed before that all those mortally wounded men survived. He had never before seriously entertained any suspicions about Dr. Westin, but in that moment, he looked around the compound and found Dr. Westin standing outside his tent. Dr.

Westin was smoking a pipe, but never took his eyes off of them. A chill ran up George's spine as he watched the doctor's dark eyes staring at him through the rings and curls of smoke.

"Oy, George, back to it." One of the other nurses was behind George waiting for him to take one of the patients off the wagon.

"Look at him," George said, "just standing there staring at us."

"Aye, they're all talking about him."

George shook his head to free the thought from his mind. "What am I saying, I have no time for such superstitious nonsense."

"You said it yourself. Look at him standing there staring at us."

George was unaware that Rebecca was standing just below him, listening. "He's not looking at the two of you. He's looking at the wounded. He's a good doctor."

"They're all good doctors."

"Sure," she replied, "they're all good, but he's just a bit better than the others."

"Nobody is that good," the other nurse said, "Look at his eyes. He doesn't even have pupils."

"You're daft," she replied, "He just has really dark eyes."

"Dark like the devils."

"So," Rebecca said, "you've looked into the devil's eyes have you? Maybe they should be talking about you and the company you keep."

"I'd keep better company," he said with a sinister smile, "if you'd just find your way to my cot tonight."

Dr. Pearl, who had been leaning over a dying man offering last rites, heard the offensive remark. "That will be quite enough from you Shamus O'Callahan, I'll be seeing you in my tent where you'll be saying your Hail Marys until your throat goes dry."

"But you're not even Catholic," Shamus complained, "How can you give me penance?"

Dr. Pearl pointed at Shamus and said, "I'll be giving you a switch on your back if you don't rein in your mouth."

"What'd I say?" Shamus's face was crimson red. "You know I didn't mean it like that. I've always loved Rebecca, but she ..."

"Quiet lad, she probably can't stand the stench coming from your mouth. Some Hail Marys might do you a bit of good washing that filth out." Dr. Pearl turned and winked at Rebecca, who by now had weathered the insult Shamus had flung at her.

"My apologies, Rebecca, truly I did not mean it to sound as vulgar as it came out."

Rebecca caught Dr. Pearl's eye and returned his wink, "Well, it certainly was a vulgar remark," she said, "Too bad though, I was feeling a bit lonely today and could have used the company. Such a shame you'll be spending your evening with Dr. Pearl saying your Hail Marys."

Shamus held his hands over his heart as if he had been struck by an arrow, "Now that truly hurts. What would your mother say if she heard you toy with me like that?"

George shot a look to Rebecca, she didn't respond, but simply jumped off the wagon and followed the wounded to the infirmary. "Way to go Shamus."

"What'd I say?"

"Let's just say that she's sensitive about her parents."

"Why?" Shamus asked, "What's wrong with her parents?"

"Nothing, 'cepting she never knew them. She was raised by the parish priests."

Shamus's mouth hung open, he was blushing bright red from chin to forehead, "I didn't know, I didn't mean nothin' by it."

Rebecca entered the tent and started her preparations. In addition to making the wounded comfortable and keeping them warm and fed, her duties also included cleaning the wounds before the doctor made his examinations. She used two standard salves to treat the men. She always mixed a fresh batch at the start of the day. Both salves started with beef lard and baking soda. The lard was only used to deliver the ingredients in a paste which could be rubbed into the flesh. In one salve she added camphor. This paste was spread on the chests and helped to reduce coughing diseases which so often followed such serious wounds. The second paste was mixed with citrus juice, lemon and lime worked best. This was administered to the wounds after cleaning.

Rebecca went to the first cot. She scraped off the snow that was used to pack the wound, peeled his pants away from what looked like a blade wound. She had to cut part of the pant hem to expose the whole wound. She picked out some large pieces of debris, mostly bark and dried twigs, then rubbed some of the lemon & soda mixture into the wound. Rubbing the salve mixed the baking soda and citrus

creating a fizz which helped clean the wounds. She felt the familiar tingle in her hands as she gingerly rubbed the balm into the wound. The doctor would be here soon, and the wound wasn't bleeding too much, so she didn't bandage it just yet. She moved up to his chest, and opened his shirt to rub the camphor into his chest. He was sleeping and stirred a bit, cracking his eyes enough to see her, then dropped back asleep. Her hands were still tingling, and warm now. She cleaned her hands and moved on to the next patient.

She opened up the boy's shirt and exposed a stab wound to the chest. She cleaned out the wound and packed it with the soda solution, but couldn't administer the camphor solution near the wound.

Dr. Westin was usually right behind her tending to the wounded. She saw him standing at the entrance watching her. He had a frightfully strange look on his face. She felt a strange twisting in her stomach. The tribunal must have really shook him up. She worked her way from patient to patient, while he just stood there and watched. She guessed he would rather let them die than suffer the retribution of the tribunal. She wondered how much comfort she could give them if he was going to let them die.

She finished preparing the last patient, and approached Dr. Westin, "You can't just stand there and let them die."

"No, no, of course not," he said, "I was just watching."

She heard some low voices just outside the entrance and realized he wasn't actually alone. The doctor's face contorted and his eyes welled up with tears. She thought he was going to say something, but then he held himself back. His face was pale. He lunged forward as if he were shoved in the back before he spoke again, "Rebecca, they want me to ask you, what's that thing you do before each patient?"

She was confused, and didn't know what he was asking. The room was swirling around her. She was barely audible when she squeaked out, "Who wants to know? What thing?"

"With your hands. You make some kind of signs with your hands as you approach each patient."

"Signs? I don't know what you are talking about Dr. Westin. I just clean their wounds, sometimes I have to remove some of their clothing, and then I apply the salves. You know that. Who is it that is asking these questions?"

"I know you clean the wounds, but between patients, you dip your hands in water and make some kind of signs with your hands."

One of the gentlemen who had been standing outside pushed his way inside, shoving Dr. Westin completely out of the way. He was a repulsive man, short and stocky. He had a large round face with thick bushy eyebrows. His face was dark red, and featured a huge dark mole which sprouted four or five dark wiry hairs. His hair was oily and his skin was sweaty, and he obviously hadn't bathed recently. When she had seen him from across the compound, she thought he was revolting. Up close, he was absolutely vile. Her stomach twisted into a tighter knot as he approached her. He moved without grace, but with the bearing that he believed every move he made was completely graceful. He moved directly into her face and stared her right in the eyes. "Who do you pray to when you dip your hands in the water. We saw you make the signs. You did not fold your hands as a Christian. You never looked up in prayer. So now you must tell us. What heathen god do you sign with the water?"

"With the water?" Rebecca was getting frightened, "I don't make signs, I wash my hands then wave them to rinse off the water."

"Why not use a towel to dry your hands? You will tell us what signs you are making."

"The towels end up getting quite foul with the two salves, especially the camphor, so I try to dry my hands in the air."

The repulsive man spread his arms wide and said, "Everyone else uses towels, why are you the only one making signs?"

"I am not making any signs," she complained, "and if everyone else is using towels, then they must be rubbing camphor into the wounds."

The short stocky man leaned forward, and squinted his eyes, looking her directly in the face, "Are you a doctor miss? Why should you care if some camphor is worked into the wounds?"

"The camphor burns. I feel it burning my hands. I could never apply it to an open wound."

"Nobody else complains of it burning, and nobody else makes signs to the devil." The stocky man signaled two soldiers to come in. "You are accused of witch craft and heresy. You will be tried by tribunal, and when you are found guilty, you will be burned at the stake until your unholy soul leaves our world and returns to your master."

Her mouth fell open. She wanted to protest, but she was unable. The room was gone from her vision. She felt as though she were about to fall faint on the spot. All she could see was the vile little man's dark eyes staring into hers.

The two soldiers grabbed her by the arms, careful to control her wrists so she could make no signs against them. The doctor started to attend his patients, but the short man stopped him, "Leave them, we will have our evidence soon enough if they live."

She was led to a tent on the far side of the compound. She was bound, hand and foot, and tethered to an anchor in the ground. There was nothing gentle or compassionate in their handling of her, nor was there the least bit of concern for her comfort or well-being. Her hands were shackled together with an iron bar holding them about a foot apart. Her feet were shackled to chains which held her firmly to the ground which was cold and hard. Not even straw was offered between her and the frozen dirt.

She had no visitors. The guards preferred to keep their distance and call her names from outside the tent. When her food was delivered, they held it in front of her while they spat into it. She thought she heard George try to visit her, but they refused to allow him in, chasing him off suggesting that if he insisted they would have to investigate his relationship with the witch. Only the vulgar sweaty pig of a man would visit her. He always came alone. He always crowded her face with his own ruddy excuse for a face. He would demand, in a loud commanding voice, that she reveal her demon lord, but then he would speak the most humiliating things in a voice that only she could hear. He never tired of telling her what a horrible end she would come to at the stake. He would reach under her tunic and roughly squeeze and pull her breasts. Throughout his abuse of her, he would suggest ways for her to earn an easier quicker death than the burning. She no longer fought to remain conscious. She didn't know whether it was his odor or just her fear and hatred of him, but every visit brought her closer to fainting, which was far better than enduring his presence.

Days passed, she didn't eat, and barely slept. She no longer cried. She had given up all hope and did not understand what was happening to her. She couldn't fight off her tormentor's abuses. Even if the shackles had been removed, she no longer had the strength to fend him off. He took whatever privileges he dared, and she lay dead to him, unconscious and dreaming of another world.

She lost count of how often he came to visit, or how many days had passed. She had never before in her life hated anyone as much as she hated that awful fat little man. She dreamed that she lived in a magical world where she could share her pain and misery with him. In her dreams she made him feel sorrow and emptiness instead of the hate and loathing he expressed towards her. She could make him hate himself instead of her. This is exactly what she was dreaming when he visited her one final time.

She was somewhere between consciousness and sleep, but was aware when he entered the tent with two guards at his side. He ordered them to stand her up. They grabbed her by the arms and briskly flung her onto her feet. She no longer cared what they did to her, nothing could ever compare with her humiliation by the wretched little toad that now stood before her.

He closed in on her face. He smiled as he slapped her face to rouse her from her dreams, "Wake up! Wake up little witch! I have good news for you today. We no longer require your confession. No more questions about your unholy practices. Your patients have told us all we need to know. You'll be glad to know that we'll be transferring you from this location to a facility that was specially designed to handle your kind." He leaned and pressed his lips to her ears and whispered, "We'll be sending you back to hell now."

He stepped back and assumed a more commanding posture, "Take her outside and hang her on the stake."

She knew this would be coming, and had resigned herself to her fate. She did not know how anyone could be so cold and uncaring that they could order such a fate for another human being. She couldn't understand how they could possibly come to such a horrendous conclusion. But she was beginning to understand hate, and had concluded that the evil little troll had orchestrated this whole affair. She didn't know why he hated her so much, she had never done anything to him, but she had learned to hate him back in equal shares. More than ever, she wished her dreams could be true and she could share the pain before her with that pathetic little worm.

The guards dragged her through the compound, not because she resisted, but because her legs wouldn't respond normally, and their pace was too swift. In the center of the compound she saw her destination. A tall wooden post surrounded with a rather large pile of wood. In the center of the bar that kept her hands apart, there was an iron ring. They pulled her to the top of the pile, raised her arms over

her head and slipped that ring onto a hook atop the center stake. She fell slack, hanging from the hook as the guards quickly jumped down from the pile.

She saw the reason for their haste, the wicked little devil of a man was already setting a torch to the pile of wood. An evil smile spread across his broad dark face. The flames spread around her. Spectators started to form a circle around the pyre. The guards stepped back to a comfortable distance, but the fat little runt stayed close, still looking her in the eyes. She could see the flames reflecting off his pupils.

Smoke encircled her and soon filled her lungs, burning her every breath. The flames reached the top of the wood pile and started to lick her flesh. She wished for the unconsciousness that accompanied his unwanted visits, but she could not find that peace, so she tried being brave. She pretended she was the girl she dreamed of and tried pushing her pain on to the round little bastard standing just outside the flames. He pumped his fists up and down in the air, egging the flames on. Without lowering her gaze into his eyes, she focused on all the strange feelings she dreamed of, opening his mind and pouring her pain into it, forcing him to feel feeble and wracked with unforgivable sorrow. The flames grew, catching the hem of her dress and searing her legs. She didn't want to give the repugnant little insect any satisfaction at all, but she could bear the pain no longer. Her legs were pinned down and could not retract from the fire, her mouth stretched wide to scream and the compound echoed with the words "It burns! It burns! The pain!", but it was not her voice she heard. An instant before her flesh blistered and fried, she could see the horrid little man, and instead of the wicked smile, he was screaming at the top of his lungs, "It burns! It burns!"