

The Forbidden Fort*

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Even the few times I was granted the role of nurse, I was forbidden to enter the fort. It was off-limits, a sacred place never to be defiled by the presence of a girl.

I argued that the wounded ought to be carried within, out of the line of fire. My pleas were always in vain and were usually greeted by such comments as, "Either you treat us on the field or you don't treat us at all!" or "Who asked her to play, anyway? We don't need any nurse."

This was very close to being the truth. My patients were all too eager to be shot and then dramatically collapse and roll down a hill with long cries of agony. However, their injuries were usually not grave enough to prevent them from firing back at whoever had shot them, and they even maintained enough strength to argue the accuracy of the shot.

When I rushed eagerly to mend a fallen soldier, I found that my treatment was often unwanted.

"Get away from me, Carol!"

"But you just got shot!"

"Yeah, I know. Well, I . . . I died."

"Then you can't play anymore!"

"Yes, I can! I'm a different soldier now!"

Irrefutable logic of this kind always caused me to break down in tears of frustration. I would invariably sulk back to the house amidst taunts of, "Baby! You can't even play a game without crying!", "We didn't want you, anyway!", and then the worst one of all, "Go play with your dolls!"

I often did return to my dolls but only to sit and glare at them and bemoan the cruel fate which had sentenced me to being born a girl.

The next day would be the same. I would ask to play, they would refuse with cries of disgust, and my mother would intercede in my behalf with, "Oh, Carol can play, can't she? She just wants to be the nurse."

Actually, that was not the case at all. My dearest wish was to be

a soldier like the others, but I knew far better than to suggest that.

With my mother's assistance, I usually won my position as nurse amid grumblings of protest among my brother and his comrades in arms. They quickly humbled my victory by reminding me that I was only a "dumb nurse" and was to stay out of the way. They also cruelly reminded me that I could never be shot. This matter had come up after a particular incident. I had long admired the dramatic death scenes performed by my brother and his friends and had longed to display my own dramatic abilities, so once while running across the field to one of the wounded, I suddenly let out a bloodcurdling scream, and clutching my breast, staggered a few steps and fell to the ground. I rolled and writhed, and then, with a last gasp, I died. I kept my eyes closed for a few seconds for the effect and then opened them, anticipating perhaps a round of applause. Instead, I opened my eyes to find myself encircled by my brother and his friends, all with expressions of complete disgust. I got up slowly and smiled weakly. My brother glared at me and announced, "Nurses don't get shot. Don't do that again."

Fighting back tears, I ran into the house. It was a few days before I ventured to join the war again.

Regarding my most hated restriction, I had never seriously contemplated entering the fort. My brother had absolutely refused me permission to explore the mysteries of their coveted citadel and had also promised horrifying booby traps if I ever went near their fort. He refused to answer my questions as to their nature but only smiled demonically and repeated his warnings to stay away.

I pleaded with my mother to force my brother to open the fort to me. She betrayed me by siding with him. She explained soothingly that my brother had built it, and it was his right if he decided that it should be off limits to me. I rebelled, but it was painfully useless.

I finally agreed, and consented to keep my distance from the fort. Meanwhile, I entertained devious thoughts of subversion. I was certain that my brother's threats of booby traps were fictitious. I tried to appear as disinterested as possible in the fort and even ceased my endless requests to join the wars.

I awoke one morning knowing it was the day. All during breakfast, I ate silently with a sly, knowing smile. I dressed, and confiding

in my dog, I told him my intentions and asked him to accompany me. He listened passively and then trotted away, apparently not wishing to have anything to do with such a daring scheme.

I left the house and headed towards the far corner of the yard. The fort was encircled by huge logs, reminders of the great cherry tree which had been judged to be too dangerously close to the house and had been cruelly cut down. Looming behind the logs were wooden planks nailed together to function as walls, decorated by the traditional greeting, "Keep Out!"

I approached the fort warily, any minute expecting a regiment of trained rats or snakes to confront and attack me, or a poisonous gas to billow out and envelop and suffocate me.

What actually happened was a bit less dramatic than my nightmarish anticipations. I had no sooner crawled over the first log than something hard and heavy came crashing down on my head, knocking me to the ground. I screamed in terror and closed my eyes, awaiting the next dastardly blow of the booby trap. Apparently, that was all there was to it. I opened my tear-filled eyes and recognized my attacker as the old two-man dirt sifter which my father had long ago put out for the trash men. It had been suspended diagonally above from the branch of a tree and, somehow, I had tripped it.

With a great amount of effort, I pushed it aside and raised myself up to see my mother running towards me with an intense look of alarm. She realized all too quickly what had happened, and I realized that both my brother and myself were in a great deal of trouble. Her first concern was for my injuries. She led me inside and planted an ice bag on my head in a futile attempt to stop the swelling of a vicious lump.

She said nothing as she washed my cuts and scratches except to make a motherly inquiry as to the condition of the rest of my body. I assured her tearfully that I was "o.k."

When my brother returned from school and gathered what had happened, he yelled at me, displaying a vocabulary far beyond his years.

My mother quickly cut him off with the sole comment, "She's not the only one in trouble, young man."

He cringed and retreated to his room. We both awaited the return of my father with a sickening feeling of dread.

When he did come home, he entered the door cheerfully and gave my mother the traditional homecoming kiss and the customary question of, "Well, what's new today?" My mother pursed her lips and nodded in my direction. He took in my reddened eyes and leaking ice bag and frowned. The frown never left his face while Mother recounted the day's events.

He announced softly, "Let's eat first and discuss this after dinner."

It was an uncomfortable, silent dinner to say the least. Afterwards, I began to clear away the dishes dutifully, the first time to do so without being asked.

My father pulled his seat back from the table and said, "Carol, come back and sit down. That can be done later."

I winced and sat down again, staring at the cold, congealed food left on my plate.

My father addressed himself to my brother first and said sternly, "Do you know that you could have very seriously injured your sister today?"

My brother bit his lip and stared at the table, remaining silent.

Then addressing himself to me, he said, "And Carol, you know you had strict instructions to stay away from the fort."

I nodded and felt my eyes filling with tears.

He sighed with a great tiredness and then solemnly delivered his verdict.

"This Saturday will be spent tearing down the fort and carting away the logs."

My brother looked up in horror, but on seeing the seriousness of my father's expression, he remained silent and glared steadfastly at me. I looked away.

My father then added, "I'm very disappointed in both of you."

He rose and left the kitchen, leaving my brother, myself and my mother, who had no words of sympathy for either of us.

That Saturday was terrible. The destruction of the fort was carried out in the manner of a funeral with all of the neighborhood boys gathered in silent mourning, regarding me resentfully.

Along with the fort's destruction came a strange, abrupt ending to the war games. The fort was never referred to again, and I never asked to join any more games between my brother and his friends.

