

NIGHTINGALE

Written by

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FADE IN:

INT. SCUTARI HOSPITAL - NIGHT

The room is almost pitch black. Countless wounded men lie in makeshift beds that are squashed together side by side. Some are moaning, a few are sobbing, one man is whimpering for his mother, and others lie completely still.

The door opens and the light of a lamp penetrates the darkness. The slim, feminine figure holding the lamp glides between the makeshift beds with almost ethereal grace.

DYING MAN

Are you an angel?

The figure turns and, illuminated by her lamp, the stern but kind face of 34 year old FLORENCE NIGHTINGALE gazes at him.

FLORENCE NIGHTINGALE

No. But I am a servant of God.

INT. WAR OFFICE - DAY

SIDNEY HERBERT, a gentleman with hair that looks both neat and unkempt, is reading a letter.

FLORENCE NIGHTINGALE (V.O.)

Dearest Mr Herbert. I shall not waste words. The conditions here are dreadful. We have little food or water, our blankets are in short supply, and it feels like the Devil himself walks these halls, picking off patients one by one. The hygiene practices leave much to be desired and I am currently trying to implement handwashing into the nurses' daily routine. However, this is a poor substitute for our lack of medicine, food, water and equipment. I humbly request that you speak to Sir Robert and ask him to arrange the transport of more supplies. Ever yours sincerely,
Florence Nightingale.

Sidney leans back after finishing and runs a hand through his neatly unkempt hair.

INT. SIDNEY HERBERT'S HOUSE - DAY

Sidney is conversing with his pretty wife, ELIZABETH HERBERT, while they drink tea together.

ELIZABETH HERBERT
After seven years, she still calls
you Mr Herbert?

SIDNEY HERBERT
Nearly eight years actually. She
strives to be professional.

ELIZABETH HERBERT
Perhaps we should visit her.
Florence has claimed to be in the
Kingdom of Hell before. Surely it
can't be that terrible.

SIDNEY HERBERT
I'm afraid you'll have to go
without me, Liz. Politics, you
understand.

ELIZABETH HERBERT
Of course. You must keep the grumpy
old codgers satisfied.

She gives him a rueful smile.

SIDNEY HERBERT
In fairness, I could be working
with a far worse grumpy old codger
than Sir Robert Peel.

Elizabeth politely sips her tea.

ELIZABETH HERBERT
It's a long trip to Scutari.

SIDNEY HERBERT
It is. But Florence was willing to
make it.

INT. SCUTARI HOSPITAL - DAY

Florence is helping a nervous looking nurse, a plain woman named FANNY who looks like she could be anywhere between 20 and 35 years old, feed a very irritable looking man with bleeding gums. He is actively trying to resist the food.

FANNY
Please sir, you have to eat.

The man glares at her before rolling over, his angry facade cracking as he whimpers in pain.

FANNY (CONT'D)

I think he'd prefer death.

FLORENCE NIGHTINGALE

I'll handle this, Fanny. I don't think God will accept this man yet.

She hands Fanny a shining surgical knife and gestures towards another patient. Fanny goes over to him before glancing back at Florence, who gives her a stern look.

INT. SCUTARI HOSPITAL KITCHEN - DAY

Florence is washing her hands when one of the oldest nurses, ELIZA ROBERTS, strides into the room.

ELIZA ROBERTS

Flo, you have a visitor.

FLORENCE NIGHTINGALE

Eliza, this is why people criticise your management skills.

Elizabeth hesitates at the door.

ELIZA ROBERTS

She meant the nickname, not you, Liz.

Florence looks up in shock when she hears the name and Eliza gives both higher class ladies an impish grin while Elizabeth looks unsure about how to respond.

ELIZA ROBERTS (CONT'D)

Says Old Pepper's got no tact. Just trying to liven this shithole up.

Seemingly oblivious to Elizabeth's appalled expression, she washes her hands thoroughly before she leaves.

FLORENCE NIGHTINGALE

I'm sorry about her, Elizabeth. And I'm touched that you came all the way out here.

ELIZABETH HERBERT

I had to see it for myself. That woman is...

FLORENCE NIGHTINGALE
An excellent nurse. I employ her
for her skills, not her manners.

ELIZABETH HERBERT
I see. What about the patients? Is
it really as bad as your letter
claims?

FLORENCE NIGHTINGALE
Walk with me.

INT. SCUTARI HOSPITAL - DAY

The men are lying in various states of agony. A few raise their heads to look at the two women. One manages a weak wave. Florence gives him a gentle smile and returns the gesture.

ELIZABETH HERBERT
How many?

FLORENCE NIGHTINGALE
Across all the hospitals? Ten
thousand, three hundred and twenty
seven. And many more will join
them.

Elizabeth takes a horrified moment to process that.

ELIZABETH HERBERT
Well, how many are here?

FLORENCE NIGHTINGALE
Two thousand, five hundred and
seventy nine.

ELIZABETH HERBERT
Sidney told me this facility wasn't
built to house so many patients.

FLORENCE NIGHTINGALE
It wasn't. And not all of them are
soldiers.

They pass one of the very few female patients. CLARA is a pretty girl but also frighteningly skinny and curled into a foetal position as she coughs.

FLORENCE NIGHTINGALE (CONT'D)
She won't tell me what ails her.

ELIZABETH HERBERT
Any ideas?

FLORENCE NIGHTINGALE
Yes. And I believe she feels
ashamed.

ELIZABETH HERBERT
Perhaps any female patients should
be sent home. They weren't on the
battlefield and you don't have
enough space.

FLORENCE NIGHTINGALE
My duty is to care for all who need
it, Elizabeth. Besides, she doesn't
have a home.

They reach the end of the long hallway.

FLORENCE NIGHTINGALE (CONT'D)
Has Sidney spoken to Sir Robert?

ELIZABETH HERBERT
He has. Robert should be in
negotiations as we speak but you
know how little the other
politicians care.

She glances back at the rows of patients.

ELIZABETH HERBERT (CONT'D)
How could God let this happen?

FLORENCE NIGHTINGALE
I ask myself that every day.

ELIZABETH HERBERT
And yet, you still believe?

FLORENCE NIGHTINGALE
I do.

INT. SCUTARI HOSPITAL OFFICE - DAY

Florence is signing papers with Eliza when Fanny bursts into
the room. Florence looks mildly annoyed by the interruption
while Eliza looks furious.

ELIZA ROBERTS
Damn you girl, what have we told
you about barging in?

FANNY

I'm sorry, but one of the men is having a seizure.

Eliza's scolding look vanishes instantly and she sweeps out of the room, leaving Fanny looking very distressed.

FANNY (CONT'D)

I'm so sorry.

FLORENCE NIGHTINGALE

Fanny, I think this job is too much for you.

Fanny looks terrified.

FANNY

What? No, I want to help.

FLORENCE NIGHTINGALE

I know you do. But you're lacking in experience.

FANNY

Well how am I supposed to get experience if you don't give me a chance?

Florence looks at her sternly and she deflates.

FANNY (CONT'D)

I know I'm not the best nurse. All theory, no practice. But I'm trying.

Florence glides around the desk, puts a hand on her shoulder and gives her a conspiratorial smile.

FLORENCE NIGHTINGALE

Did you know Pepper can't read and barges in on me all the time?

Fanny giggles and her face brightens.

FLORENCE NIGHTINGALE (CONT'D)

You have a good education and an excellent attitude. I'm sure you will make an exemplary nurse. Just not yet.

FANNY

But I can't go home a failure.

FLORENCE NIGHTINGALE
 I didn't say you were going home.
 I'm sure your previous mentor can
 teach you better than I.

FANNY
 But you'll have one less nurse.

Florence's smile fades.

FANNY (CONT'D)
 Oh. You'll have one less liability.
 Could you at least write that I
 resigned of my own will?

FLORENCE NIGHTINGALE
 That wouldn't be true.

Fanny gives her a pleading look. Florence silently relents.

INT. SCUTARI HOSPITAL - NIGHT

Florence walks between the patients, holding her lamp. Most are asleep and a few are tossing and turning.

Florence hears a girl crying and coughing at the same time. Clara tries to stifle her spluttering sobs. Florence sits cross legged on the floor and sets down her lamp, letting Clara cry herself out.

CLARA
 I've prayed and I've prayed. But I
 still think I'm going to Hell.

FLORENCE NIGHTINGALE
 I do not believe that.

CLARA
 But I have sinned. I'm... I'm a
 whore. I was desperate. I didn't
 know what else to do. But I think
 God is punishing me. He will hate
 me.

FLORENCE NIGHTINGALE
 He will not. Hate is not in God's
 nature. Did Jesus Christ not make
 that clear?

CLARA
 But the Old Testament claimed...

FLORENCE NIGHTINGALE

The Old Testament is separated from the New for a reason. Satan's shadow hangs heavily over it.

Clara looks horrified as she coughs violently.

CLARA

Nurse Nightingale, that's...

FLORENCE NIGHTINGALE

I know. But think of the stones that were thrown in the Old and how Jesus rejected such barbarity in the New. You would follow Jesus' word on the matter, would you not?

CLARA

Of course I would. Stoning people is... not as horrifying as crucifixion but it's still the work of savages. I wouldn't wish it on anybody.

Florence smiles approvingly but it fades into a look of concern as Clara coughs violently. The girl is deathly pale.

CLARA (CONT'D)

Nurse Nightingale, I think I'm dying. And the other side... even if you are right I don't... I don't want to go.

Florence helps her sit up so she can hug her. Clara starts crying again and Florence gently rocks her like a child.

CLARA (CONT'D)

Pray God, that you may never be in the despair I'm in at this time.

FLORENCE NIGHTINGALE

Oh, my girl, are you not more merciful than the God you think you are going to? Yet the real God is far more merciful than any human creature ever was or can ever imagine.

Clara pulls back and gulps back tears. She glances around at the dying men around them and wipes her eyes. She coughs again but looks angry with herself as she does so.

CLARA

This war is about these brave men.
Not me. You should help those who
can still be saved.

Florence gives her a warm smile and lays a hand on the girl's heart.

FLORENCE NIGHTINGALE

This is the kind of soul that God
will joyfully accept into Heaven.

INT. SCUTARI HOSPITAL OFFICE - DAY

Florence is signing paperwork with a sorrowful look on her face. Her lamp is on her desk. She crosses Clara's name off the list of patients as Eliza enters.

ELIZA ROBERTS

Afternoon Flo.

FLORENCE NIGHTINGALE

Eliza, please don't.

ELIZA ROBERTS

Don't tell you that the supplies
you requested have arrived?

Florence's look of weary irritation fades.

ELIZA ROBERTS (CONT'D)

Thought that would cheer you up.
And Mr Sid is here too.

FLORENCE NIGHTINGALE

You didn't actually call him that
did you?

Eliza grins toothily.

INT. SCUTARI HOSPITAL - DAY

Sidney, who is wearing a top hat, greets Florence with a handshake while his assistants bring in blankets, food, water and medicine.

FLORENCE NIGHTINGALE

Thank you Sidney. This could save
many lives.

SIDNEY HERBERT

It's not me you should thank. Her Majesty personally intervened.

FLORENCE NIGHTINGALE

Is she permitted to do that?

SIDNEY HERBERT

Parliament didn't think so, but try telling Queen Victoria what she can and can't do.

FLORENCE NIGHTINGALE

Magnificent woman.

SIDNEY HERBERT

As are you, Florence. Sir Robert and a couple of others confided in me that they admire what you're doing.

His assistants are starting to file out, having handed everything over the other nurses. Fanny is among them.

SIDNEY HERBERT (CONT'D)

Do you require any more assistance?

FLORENCE NIGHTINGALE

Actually, there's one more thing you can do for me. My youngest employee hasn't managed to arrange transport to Koulali.

She glances at Fanny and Sidney follows her gaze. Behind Fanny, Eliza has already started laying the new blankets over patients who lack them.

SIDNEY HERBERT

Incompetent?

FLORENCE NIGHTINGALE

Inexperienced. She would flourish under a better teacher. You'll find details of her qualifications in this.

She hands him a letter and he tips his hat to her. Fanny looks relieved as she goes back to work. Eliza shoots her an annoyed look but the girl, trying to be useful, ignores her.

INT. SCUTARI HOSPITAL OFFICE - NIGHT

Fanny meets with Florence and Sidney looking very nervous.

FLORENCE NIGHTINGALE
 Fanny, this is Sidney Herbert,
 first Baron of Lea and a close
 friend and colleague of mine.

Fanny dips into a curtsy as Sidney holds out his hand.

SIDNEY HERBERT
 Delighted to meet you, Miss.

Fanny takes his hand and he kisses her knuckles.

SIDNEY HERBERT (CONT'D)
 I'm sure my darling wife will
 permit me the gesture. Florence
 informed me that you're seeking
 passage to Koulali.

FANNY
 Yes. I realized I could be of more
 use there. Nurse Nightingale has
 been... accommodating.

Sidney raises an eyebrow and glances at Florence.

SIDNEY HERBERT
 I hope you haven't been too harsh
 with the young lady.

FANNY
 Nurse Roberts was harsher. And far
 more hypocritical.

Sidney laughs heartily and Florence looks mildly amused.

SIDNEY HERBERT
 Well, I'll be happy to escort you.

Florence lights her lamp and hesitates.

FLORENCE NIGHTINGALE
 Fanny, would you care to join me?

Fanny looks at the lamp and her plain face breaks into a
 smile that makes her look like the 23 year old she really is.

INT. SCUTARI HOSPITAL - NIGHT

Fanny's smile fades as she accompanies Florence between the
 groaning, whimpering, sobbing or, most horrifying of all,
 deathly still men.

FANNY

You really do this every night?

FLORENCE NIGHTINGALE

I do. It's very lonely.

She gives Fanny a small, sad smile. Fanny swallows.

FANNY

Can I confess something?

FLORENCE NIGHTINGALE

Of course.

FANNY

I hated it here. I wanted to help,
I wanted to prove myself but... I
knew I didn't belong. And I knew
you never liked having me here
either. I'm... glad to be leaving.

INT. SIDNEY HERBERT'S HOUSE - NIGHT

Sidney is drinking tea with Elizabeth.

ELIZABETH HERBERT

I hope the girl excels.

SIDNEY HERBERT

I believe she will. For a lower
class woman, she conducted herself
with remarkable propriety during
the ride.

ELIZABETH HERBERT

She'd better have.

She sips her tea while Sidney smiles at her lovingly.

ELIZABETH HERBERT (CONT'D)

Did Florence seem exhausted when
you saw her? When I was there...

SIDNEY HERBERT

I believe she works harder than any
other nurse in that hospital. Yet
she can still summon a smile.

He finishes his tea and lays down his cup.

SIDNEY HERBERT (CONT'D)
 More than anything, I fear that
 she's lonely. An unmarried woman at
 her age...

Elizabeth snorts and gives him a playful grin.

ELIZABETH HERBERT
 You say that like she's an old
 maid. And need I remind you my
 love, that your own wife is sitting
 right in front of you.

Sidney returns her playful grin.

SIDNEY HERBERT
 Yes, and my own wife is quite
 magnificent in the bedroom.

He rises and holds out his hand.

SIDNEY HERBERT (CONT'D)
 Shall we?

Elizabeth takes his hand, rises to her feet and they kiss.
 Then Sidney leads Elizabeth to the bedroom.

INT. SCUTARI HOSPITAL - DAY

While other nurses assist other patients, Florence helps a
 SICK MAN take his medicine. He is almost twice her size but
 looks at her like a frightened child.

SICK MAN
 Will I live?

FLORENCE NIGHTINGALE
 I believe so.

She smiles and the man relaxes.

SICK MAN
 God bless you, my Lady. If I
 survive, I wish to marry you.

Florence chuckles softly.

FLORENCE NIGHTINGALE
 A bold proposal. But marriage is
 not my calling.

Eliza enters the hallway with a bottle of medicine.

ELIZA ROBERTS

Flo, after working hours, I've got something to show you.

Several men smile at the nickname. Florence gives a curt nod as Eliza kneels beside one of the other patients with the medicine. Florence moves to another WOUNDED MAN who manages to grin, despite clearly being in considerable pain.

WOUNDED MAN

Can I call you that?

FLORENCE NIGHTINGALE

Not unless doing so saves your life.

Her annoyed expression turns into one of grim concentration as she lifts his shirt and finds a very large gash that is clearly infected splitting open his side.

WOUNDED MAN

I've already made my peace with God. Is it fatal?

FLORENCE NIGHTINGALE

Not quite.

The patient smiles weakly as she starts cleaning the wound.

INT. SCUTARI HOSPITAL OFFICE - NIGHT

Florence joins Eliza and closes the door behind her.

FLORENCE NIGHTINGALE

What do you have to show me, Pepper?

Eliza grins, takes a newspaper off the desk and shows it to her.

ELIZA ROBERTS

The public is starting to take notice.

Florence takes the newspaper and looks at it. Printed on the front page are the words The Lady With The Lamp accompanied by a picture of her own face.

FLORENCE NIGHTINGALE

You're a better nurse than I. Your face should be on here.

Eliza chuckles.

ELIZA ROBERTS

An old cow like me isn't a face
people want on the front page. But
you, my dear, are making history.

Florence smiles and puts the newspaper down on the desk. She picks up her lamp, lights it, and leaves the room.

INT. MODERN APARTMENT BEDROOM - NIGHT

A tired looking woman with a striking resemblance to Florence Nightingale is on her laptop, reading the now ancient Lady With The Lamp news article. The half opened closet behind her shows a nurse's outfit hanging neatly.

The nurse smiles as she finishes reading and shuts off the laptop. She closes the closet properly as she goes to bed.

FADE OUT.

THE END