

Sledgehammers and Dynamite  
by  
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FADE IN:

EXT. HOME - DAY

1878, Pennsylvania. A crazy man of 40 or so, J.J. FORD, fires a pistol down the street, then turns and begins nailing his front door shut. He has aimed vaguely in the direction of a young man who is standing in front of MARY, the young man's mother, and young NELLIE BLY, his sister. Nellie at this point is 14, pretty, surprisingly calm. Determined, in fact.

Brief staredown.

FORD

Throw a roasting bone at me in my own house, I'll kill that cow, her girl too!

NELLIE

Mama, stay behind Albert. What the hell is he doing?

Ford has nailed the door and window shut, and is climbing a ladder up to a second-story window.

FORD

My house! It's all mine!

NELLIE

He lost his mind. Come back Monday with the police, get our things.

Ford appears in the window and fires at them. A pane of glass shatters nearby.

INT. COURTROOM - DAY

A LAWYER examines Nellie before a JUDGE. Her mother Mary wants a divorce.

LAWYER

State your name and age....Deep breath.

Nellie pauses and plunges in.

NELLIE

Elizabeth Jane Cochrane. Born in 1864. My age is 14 years.

LAWYER

Could you spell the name, C-O-C-K-...

NELLIE  
...H. C-O-C-H...R-A-N-E.

The lawyer looks at his documents, puzzled.

LAWYER  
Is there an E at the end?

NELLIE  
There is now. I'm adding it myself.  
Coch-rane. A little more panache  
that way.

LAWYER  
(irritated)  
Your Honor -

JUDGE  
I don't care what her name is. Why  
is she testifying at all? How did a  
divorce case get to my courtroom?

LAWYER  
Just start from the beginning...

NELLIE  
My real father bought a mill here  
in Pennsylvania. Pappa died and he  
made no will, so some of the money  
went to relatives we never heard  
of, the rest just disappeared.

LAWYER  
But that was your mother's earlier  
husband, from before...?

NELLIE  
Mother married again, John Jackson  
Ford. When drunk he is very cross,  
and cross when sober. Ford left me  
to read in Daddy's library. Mother  
wasn't so lucky. He beat her -

LAWYER  
How often?

NELLIE  
Over and over. I heard him call her  
a whore and a bitch.

LAWYER  
He did actually attack your mother?

NELLIE

Threatened to choke her. Once at a Christmas party he pulled a gun and threatened to kill her; my brother grabbed him while Mamma ran.

LAWYER

And what happened this last time?

NELLIE

He smashed the walls, furniture, threw the bone from the roast at mother. She had enough, threw it back at him. He pulled his gun, I jumped between them. Then, he nailed the doors shut and climbed a ladder into the house.

JUDGE

And? Why is this my problem?

NELLIE

AND, some day he's gonna kill her. AND, then it WILL be your problem.

JUDGE

Half the men in town beat their wives...

NELLIE

I know we're just a bunch of farmers and miners, I know women don't get divorces ...I want my mother to live, to see me get married. Please. Just...set us free. I'll go find a job. We'll survive.

JUDGE

You'll get a job?

NELLIE

A girl has to be able to look out for herself.

JUDGE

You'll starve.

NELLIE

I can do it: energy rightly applied and directed can accomplish anything.

JUDGE

I think that only works with  
sledgehammers and dynamite.

NELLIE

Sledgehammers and dynamite.

Bly smiles sweetly at him.

INT. HOME - DAY

Bly, now 20, writes a letter. Mary enters with a book and Bly hands her a newspaper. Then scribbles furiously on a piece of paper.

NELLIE

Who is this jackass?...Erasmus  
Wilson?

MARY

Who?

NELLIE

This idiot in the Pittsburgh  
Dispatch...Read this garbage!

MARY

(reads)

"What Girls Are Good For. Hiring  
women for work takes them away from  
their proper"...Hmm. "Woman should  
sew, cook and clean. Her sphere is  
defined by a single word, home. A  
woman outside her sphere is  
wresting from man the prerogatives  
bequeathed by heaven, disgusting to  
womanly women and manly men. There  
is no greater abnormity than a  
woman in breeches, unless it is a  
man in petticoats." Quaint, isn't  
it?

NELLIE

See? Mother, he's an idiot.

Mary reads over Nellie's shoulder.

MARY

Women don't write letters to  
newspapers - you won't be able to  
show your face on the street!

NELLIE  
That's silly.

MARY  
That letter, if they publish it  
you'll be jailed for libel! The  
kind of language father would use.

Mary yanks the letter away.

NELLIE  
Father?

MARY  
Sorry. I meant Ford.

NELLIE  
I don't have a father.

MARY  
You got that nonsense off your  
chest, write a sensible letter. And  
sign it "Lonely Orphan Girl".

Mary smiles and Nellie laughs. Mary peruses Nellie's letter.

NELLIE  
I don't have a father, but I have a  
mother you know... Does it bother  
you? Not having a man around?

MARY  
I did all that. Twice. ...By the way,  
you left out the "K" in "jackass"...

INT. NEWSPAPER OFFICE - DAY

GEORGE MADDEN, editor of the Pittsburgh Dispatch, sees one of  
his columnists, ERAMUS WILSON in front of his desk. The  
office is messy and very masculine. Madden is reading mail.

ERASMUS  
George Madden -- you've put  
tomorrow's edition to bed yet?

MADDEN  
You're more popular than I thought.  
Postman added a second mailbag just  
for you. Touched a nerve out there.

Madden hands over a letter. Wilson reads and becomes more and  
more outraged.

ERASMUS

For God's sake... That's not what I...  
 Hmm...author is out of his mind, but  
 he can actually write a bit...

He looks at the bottom.

ERASMUS (CONT'D)

"Lonely Orphan Girl"? It's a woman?

MADDEN

Can't imagine a woman making  
 herself a pariah by writing a  
 letter like that. She has a lot to  
 learn about style...But what she has  
 to say, she knocks it straight off.  
 New reporter, perhaps.

ERASMUS

Put out an ad, bring her in.

MADDEN

"Lonely Orphan Girl, send us your  
 real name and address"?

Wilson reads.

ERASMUS

Exactly. ...A lot to learn about  
 style. And punctuation, and  
 paragraphs, grammar, handwriting...

INT. NEWSPAPER OFFICE - DAY

Madden enters his dark office and realizes someone has been  
 in it. He looks around to see what has been disturbed.

He sees Nellie sitting in his chair and drinking his liquor.

MADDEN

How did you get in here?

NELLIE

Mister, I must say that is top-  
 notch bourbon.

MADDEN

Who in the world are you?

NELLIE

Lonely Orphan Girl.

MADDEN

You're a child. No...You just read about the letter in the paper....

NELLIE

Came on pink paper, didn't it?

MADDEN

I said send in your name, not ambush me. What now, are you going to shoot me or stab me?

NELLIE

I don't approve of guns. Long story. Afraid of little old me?

MADDEN

You don't have a husband wondering where you are?...Where did you learn to write like that?

NELLIE

I studied to be a teacher -- for a girl, it's teacher or housemaid.

MADDEN

And you came here to give us another tongue-lashing, then?

NELLIE

It's even worse than that. Like I was saying, I want a job. Here.

MADDEN

Impossible. We have Bessie Bramble, she's driving us to distraction. Hire another girl, the owner would fire me first thing tomorrow.

NELLIE

Don't tell him.

MADDEN

This won't work. The few times any newspaper hires a woman, they gave her a man's name, to protect her...

NELLIE

Mister, these people read my stuff, they'll know a woman wrote it.

MADDEN

If you use your real name, you'll be an outcast. How about another woman's name?

NELLIE

My mother calls me Pinky.

MADDEN

How about Nellie Bly, from that thing Stephen Foster wrote?

NELLIE

A compromise, then.

MADDEN

You are quite the little pistol.

NELLIE

You know how tough a girl gets when she has to grow up with a brother? I had six brothers. And someday I'll tell you about my stepfather. Was I the only woman to write a letter about Wilson?

MADDEN

No, I got a whole bagful.

NELLIE

Damn right.

He winces as she smiles and gets up.

MADDEN

Oh my God... Five dollars per week.

She smiles, pats his shoulder.

NELLIE

Hmm...We'll see about that...Here I was expecting a cross old man.

MADDEN

Once you sign on, you cover what I tell you to. Do what you're told.

Nellie gives him a look.

INT. NEWSPAPER OFFICE - DAY

Bly writes alone.

NELLIE (V.O.)

"We should let our girls begin run errands and rise to better jobs, like boys do...There are more cooks, chambermaids and washerwomen...

EXT. STREET - DAY

Continuation. A young CHAMBERMAID is now reading the article.

CHAMBERMAID

...washerwomen than can find work. Some have aged parents, depending on them. A poor working woman, without fire to keep warm, denying herself that her little ones may not go hungry, fearing the landlord's frown, nothing to make life worth living?

INT. NEWSPAPER OFFICE - DAY

Continuation. Nellie writing as before.

NELLIE (V.O.)

If sin in the form of man comes with a wily smile and offers her money she cannot let her children freeze or starve, and so she falls.

EXT. STREET - DAY

Continuation. Chambermaid reading as before.

CHAMBERMAID

All who are well off - this girl reads what your last pug dog cost, and thinks of what that vast sum would have done for them, paid Father's doctors bill, shoes for the little ones. Imagine how nice it would be, could baby have the beef broth that is made for your favorite pug..."

INT. NEWSPAPER OFFICE - DAY

Madden, who holds a newspaper which he clearly wants to read, is forced to argue with Nellie.

MADDEN

The precinct told me, you show up at another crime scene, you'll be arrested. It's not safe, you're interfering with police business.

EXT. STREET - NIGHT

A dead body. Around it, six POLICEMEN, and Nellie. Two policemen pull two suspects off to the side.

POLICEMAN

Alright, body to the morgue, suspects in the wagon. And you!  
(to Nellie)  
Warned you. You get a night in jail with the street girls. Your husband can take you home in the morning.

The police handcuff Nellie and put her into a wagon with the two murder suspects.

INT. NEWSPAPER OFFICE - DAY

Nellie runs into the chaotic newsroom where Madden is managing a crisis; boys run messages in and out.

NELLIE

You heard about the mill?

MADDEN

Not now. ...We're all over it. Every fireman in town is on it -

NELLIE

Just send me where you need me -

MADDEN

You're not going anywhere.

NELLIE

What about the police station?

MADDEN

Tommy has it.

NELLIE

The fire station, the hospital?

MADDEN

Jimmy and Fred.

NELLIE  
City Hall?

MADDEN  
Bart. Nellie, none of those places  
will let you in. Go to the copy  
desk, tidy up the copy coming in.

She smiles. He looks up and she's gone.

EXT. FIRE SCENE - DAY

A house burns; FIREMEN rotate in and out of the fire zone,  
surrounded by POLICEMEN, neighbors and reporters including  
Bly.

NELLIE  
Officer, what happened -

POLICEMAN  
Go away.

NELLIE  
How did the fire start?

POLICEMAN  
I said go away.

She approaches a FIREMAN who is taking a break.

NELLIE  
Do you know how the fire started?

FIREMAN  
I think it looks like a leaky  
furnace -

POLICEMAN  
And what did I just tell you?

NELLIE  
I'm addressing this fire crew -

POLICEMAN  
Only kind of woman on the streets  
right now is working for a living.  
You want another night behind bars?

She rolls her eyes and proceeds to a tavern.

INT. TAVERN - DAY

Continuation. An irritated Nellie enters and approaches the BARKEEP.

BARKEEP

Don't allow no working girls here.

NELLIE

I am not in any kind of mood,  
mister.

The barkeep looks more closely.

BARKEEP

You're not a working girl? You a  
cleaning girl? Where's your man?

NELLIE

I'm by myself. I want a beer, not a  
lecture.

BARKEEP

And how will you get home?

NELLIE

(firm)  
Beer. Half of.

He brings her a half pint; she drinks with gusto.

BARKEEP

Lots of people out. Bad crowd on  
Fourth Avenue. The Campbell gang.

NELLIE

I go into bars by myself all the  
time. The Campbells aren't up on  
the Allegany causing trouble?

BARKEEP

I'm not saying a thing about the  
Campbells. Get the whole place  
burned to the ground with me in it.

NELLIE

They don't have that big warehouse  
anymore, the card games?

BARKEEP

Not saying a thing on em. Come up  
the bridge, raise hell, grab cash  
out of the till, like it's theirs.

NELLIE

Goodness.

BARKEEP

Not saying a thing about the  
Campbells. Man's got to keep his  
mouth shut in this town.

NELLIE

Mum's the word.

She drains the beer and tosses a coin on the bar.

BARKEEP

Nice meeting you.

NELLIE

Oh, I'll be back.

EXT. STREET - NIGHT

Campbell toughs horse around. One barks orders to a group of  
prostitutes. Nellie steps out of the tavern, watching. One of  
the prostitutes looks suspiciously at her.

EXT. STREET - NIGHT

A day later. Campbell toughs come over a bridge to an  
intersection, only to be surrounded by policemen and loaded  
into carts. Nellie steps out of the same doorway, smiling.

INT. MAYOR'S OFFICE - DAY

Nellie before a crowd with the MAYOR, getting a testimonial.  
The nasty policeman is in attendance.

MAYOR

Let's thank Miss Bly for helping us  
put the Campbells behind bars.  
Anything we can do, let us know.

NELLIE

This officer, all this happened on  
his beat. I'm sure he was waiting  
for the right moment to make his  
move. Could I follow him on his  
rounds for a week?

EXT. STREET - DAY

The cop is escorting Nelly down the street.

POLICEMAN

Now, why are you picking on me?

NELLIE

You practically called me a whore, right there on Fourth Avenue. So, now you pay the piper.

POLICEMAN

Don't see why I'm talking to you.

NELLIE

I know your beat better than you do. The prostitutes know when you sleep on shift, they cross to the other side of the park.

POLICEMAN

What --

NELLIE

Pickpockets are setting up for the parade. Campbells ran the poker game over there. Unless you were on their payroll the whole time.

POLICEMAN

No place for a lady. Rough street.

NELLIE

Somebody should do something. I shouldn't have to hide just because the boys are here. It's my street.

INT. NEWSPAPER OFFICE - DAY

Madden stands over the copy desk; Nellie is hollering at him.

NELLIE

Madden, you're two men short, please let me help with the election! The governor, the councilman, the dog catcher?

MADDEN

The wheeling and dealing is done in clubs, hotels, room full of cigar smoke. You stay on that wedding.

NELLIE  
Who gives a damn about that Parker  
girl?

MADDEN  
She's related to a Vanderbilt.

NELLIE  
Criminy!

INT. NEWSPAPER OFFICE - DAY

Madden is at the same desk, handing Nellie a sheet of paper.

MADDEN  
That Adams girl is making her  
debut.

NELLIE  
God -

MADDEN  
Her grandfather was president.

NELLIE  
Debutante ball, it's like a cattle  
show! Please, the president's  
coming to town -

MADDEN  
No!

NELLIE  
So do you want me to give up the  
poetry reading or the flower show?

MADDEN  
Whichever one isn't important.

NELLIE  
Neither one is important!

INT. NEWSPAPER OFFICE - DAY

Madden at the desk, giving Nellie another society assignment.

MADDEN  
This society girl showed up at the  
at-home wearing a tea gown! They  
say she didn't even have a corset!

Nellie rolls her eyes.

NELLIE  
Let's burn her, she's a witch!

INT. NEWSPAPER OFFICE - DAY

Copy desk, Madden hands her a sheet of paper.

MADDEN  
You want to cover an election. The Franklin Square Women's Club has a new president. Voter fraud. The society women, like a civil war!

NELLIE  
Madden, just kill me. Hit me in the head with something hard.

INT. NEWSPAPER OFFICE - DAY

Madden puts on his coat and gestures to Nellie.

MADDEN  
Nellie, do me a favor. Can you and Bessie cover the copy desk?

NELLIE  
You want two women running the paper on election day?

MADDEN  
Just for an hour or two. We're all going down to vote, and then brandy over at party headquarters.

He leaves. Nellie looks like she's been punched in the face. A young reporter named TOMMY sees her.

TOMMY  
Let me deliver you from your torment. Allegany, police went off for the election, riot in the jail.

A wicked smile spreads across her face.

NELLIE  
Tommy, I'm gonna make insane love to you right on this desk.

TOMMY  
Just buy me a beer after I bail you out of jail.

She flees the newsroom. Returns, unsmiling.

NELLIE

Tommy. Remember to vote.

INT. NEWSPAPER OFFICE - DAY

Madden is being harassed by his other female reporter, BESSIE BRAMBLE, who's older than Nellie. He is yet again being prevented from reading newspaper copy.

BESSIE

Either Nellie goes, or I go.

MADDEN

I can't fire Nellie. Even when she's dead wrong, you can't stop reading her articles, women in the factories, the poor women getting men drunk and sleeping with them. The powers that be are terrified.

BESSIE

But now she's coming after us!

MADDEN

After you, you mean.

BESSIE

She called for a women's group like the YMCA, I pointed out that we have that Christian group, Nellie fired back at me. In print.

MADDEN

I didn't see that one.

BESSIE

(reads mockingly)

"While not daring to offer our humble opinion against that of a learned lady like Bessie Bramble, yet the belief infuses our soul that one girl saved will receive a brighter reward than a lifetime spent in prayer." And then she really brings out the guns.

MADDEN

I'm keeping her, Bessie.

BESSIE

Stick her on the fashion page.

MADDEN

And what if I did that to you?

BESSIE

You're not the only paper in this town. I'm Bessie Bramble.

MADDEN

You picked this fight, because you didn't think she would fight back. Little kitty has some teeth.

BESSIE

And you get to housebreak her.

She laughs. Nellie sticks in her head and glares at Bessie.

NELLIE

I'm going to that factory fire.

MADDEN

Nellie, the answer is no.

She puts a hand to her ear, adopts a comical foreign accent.

NELLIE

No. Nooooo. What is this "no" word of which you speak? I do not know this word "no".

MADDEN

You do see that you work for me, right?

INT. NEWSPAPER OFFICE - DAY

Wilson walks toward his office, talking to a reporter.

ERASMUS

Madden tried to ease Nellie away from the hard news and toward the softer pieces.

He enters his office; Nellie is in Wilson's chair.

ERASMUS (CONT'D)

You can't quit. You know how lucky you are to have a job at all.

NELLIE

That Bramble beast isn't going to run me off the stories I want.

ERASMUS

Where will you go? You ever been out of Pennsylvania in your life?

NELLIE

You'll see. Gonna pop up where nobody expects. Here's a dollar says when I come up for air, he'll be forced to let me do real news.

ERASMUS

I'm not going to take your money.

NELLIE

You're damn right you're not taking my money. Gonna win this bet. Energy rightly applied and directed...

ERASMUS

Can accomplish anything. Well, we'll see...Can I have my chair back?

INT. TAVERN - NIGHT

Madden has a beer in front of him as Wilson enters. Wilson points to the barman for a beer.

MADDEN

Any sign of Nellie?

ERASMUS

I bet she's in Washington.

MADDEN

She always wanted New York.

Bramble enters.

BESSIE

You're both wrong. Brace yourselves. Mexico City.

MADDEN

How the hell did she get there?

ERASMUS

Clearly we didn't think big enough.

BESSIE

Word has it, they're gonna execute her.

INT. JAIL - NIGHT

Mexico. Nellie's hands are manacled. SOLDIERS lead her across a yard, with an execution post which has bullet holes behind it. The soldiers throw her in a cell, unlock her, lock her cell. They smile and point their fingers at her, like guns.

SOLDIERS

Boom boom boom.

She grips the bars and peers out. Then she wanders over to a window and looks at the sky.

INT. OPULENT OFFICE - DAY

DIAZ, ruler of Mexico, sits behind an impressive desk and chats with his son RAFFAH.

RAFFAH

Papa, you're president of Mexico,  
you can't allow her to do this.  
What do we do with this Bly girl?

DIAZ

You finally caught her?

RAFFAH

She's writing stories criticizing  
you, corruption, the reporter you  
arrested. We got her and her mother  
at the hotel -

DIAZ

Her mother...?

RAFFAH

She's the girl's chaperone.

DIAZ

What a world. She can't travel by  
herself, but she can try to launch  
a revolution in my country.

Mary is brought in. Then Bly, manacled. Guards unlock her and Mary hugs her. Diaz takes a long look at Nellie, and then gestures for her to approach.

DIAZ (CONT'D)

Senorita.

NELLIE

Presidente.

DIAZ  
You cause this much trouble in  
America?

NELLIE  
Well...yes.

DIAZ  
Tell me.

NELLIE  
I wrote about women working in  
factories, people complained to the  
paper...The editor forced me to write  
stories about flowers and...hats.

RAFFAH  
Hats?

NELLIE  
Women's hats.

RAFFAH  
But you're not writing about hats  
now.

NELLIE  
No. I am my newspaper's foreign  
correspondent in Mexico.

RAFFAH  
And how did you persuade your  
editor to take you off that  
important hat job and give you this  
job here?

NELLIE  
I didn't. I appointed myself.

DIAZ  
And how old are you?

NELLIE  
Twenty-two.

DIAZ  
(laughs)  
Come, Raffah. She's marvelous. You  
want me to take her to the parade  
ground and execute her for treason?  
No no no.

NELLIE

To be precise the word is sedition,  
not treason.

MARY

(terrified)

Will you stop -- !

DIAZ

Listen to me, my child. This is not  
America. The law is what I say it  
is. You and your mother -

(to Mary)

Madam, you must have the patience  
of Job - you leave the city  
tonight, and you leave Mexico by  
the end of the month. Go back to -  
where was it, Plattsburgh?

NELLIE

Pittsburgh.

DIAZ

Pittsburgh, and be sure to make as  
much mischief there as you did  
here. With luck they won't put you  
in jail.

NELLIE

They did that already...Usually when  
I get a spanking like this, there's  
a nasty layer of hypocrisy all over  
it. With you it's cut and dried  
like a dead fish. "Get out or I'll  
shoot you just because I can."  
Refreshing.

DIAZ

Raffah, this is just the girl for  
you. You should marry her.

RAFFAH

Papa, don't even joke like that.

NELLIE

Mamma, the boys just don't like me.

MARY

Nellie, just for once mind your  
tongue until we get to Texas.

DIAZ

Good advice, my dear...And how did  
you evade my soldiers for so long?

NELLIE

Half your soldiers spend all day  
smoking that funny green stuff,  
what was it?

DIAZ

Marijuana... I see your point. Vaya  
con dios.

NELLIE

And you too.

INT. NEWSPAPER OFFICE - DAY

Nellie finds Wilson chatting with Bessie while Bessie edits  
copy. She hugs Wilson.

NELLIE

Erasmus, old friend.

ERASMUS

Seems you don't want to burn me at  
the stake anymore. Very open-  
minded...Well, here's your dollar.

He pays up.

ERASMUS (CONT'D)

You forced Madden to put you in the  
paper again. "Nellie in Mexico".  
How did you manage all this?

NELLIE

I brought my mother along, and  
talked the railroads into giving me  
tickets. I can be very persuasive.

ERASMUS

You don't say.

NELLIE

I smuggled out more reports, I told  
the guards they were underwear.  
They were shocked that I carried my  
bags; I wanted to show I could  
travel anywhere without a man...

ERASMUS

Balderdash. My wife can't even go  
to Philadelphia without a baggage  
train that would make General Grant  
break down and cry.

NELLIE  
Philistine.

ERASMUS  
How was Christmas, then?

NELLIE  
Back in my flat. Me and a pot of  
tea and Mark Twain. Nice and quiet.

ERASMUS  
(amused)  
Don't run off, I'll tell Madden  
you're here. He'll have apoplexy.

He exits.

BESSIE  
You had an adventure down there.  
Almost got you shot, when they got  
a copy. Brought a tear to my eye.

NELLIE  
Get stuffed.

A brief staredown.

BESSIE  
Don't try my patience. ...Were you  
always like this? You know...this.

NELLIE  
I think I was an angel as a child,  
my mother says I was a wild animal,  
telling fairy tales...Teacher  
punished me because I brought a  
medical book and showed everyone  
pictures of a man's, um..

BESSIE  
I see...So what do you have on now?

NELLIE  
Trouble. The man who handled my  
inheritance made a mess of it and I  
had to sue. There's no money left.

BESSIE  
The ditty bag is empty now?

NELLIE

'Fraid so. I really need the work. I'll even do theater stories, the arts - long as I can keep my lunch down. You needn't worry about me.

BESSIE

(skeptical)

Uh-huh...That can't possibly be the limit of your ambitions.

NELLIE

I have three goals - to work for a New York newspaper, marry a millionaire, and change the world.

BESSIE

You want to go to New York? I'll walk you to the train station myself.

NELLIE

You'd be bored to tears without me.

BESSIE

You're gonna find a millionaire who's willing to let his wife run all over town chasing crooks?

NELLIE

You found one. Married a banker.

BESSIE

I am lucky. You want to change the world? It's a lonely business. Nobody wants a boat rocker. And time is not on your side.

NELLIE

That headline yesterday. Who's George McCain?

BESSIE

Our correspondent in New York. You know Madden pays McCain as much as you and me put together?

NELLIE

Is that so?

INT. NEWSPAPER OFFICE - DAY

Madden and Wilson sort mail. Madden passes a letter.

MADDEN

Letter from Nellie. She only writes when she's on another holy war...

ERASMUS

What is she angry about now?

MADDEN

Check for poison...I admit she made sales explode, but she is driving advertisers away. They're angry.

ERASMUS

(reads)

"Dear Erasmus, apart from your bouts of insanity you're a beautiful writer. Madden is demanding I put my petticoat back on. No heavy stories. Society reporting is prostitution of the brain. Madden is a gutless, spineless" - oh no, we certainly can't put THAT word in the newspaper...Pity, really...

MADDEN

Oh shut up.

ERASMUS

"I'm going to New York. Look out for me." ..."Look out for me", as in "take care of me", or "look out for me" as in "I'm going to create a public explosion"?

INT. NEWSPAPER OFFICE - DAY

Madden greets his New York man, GEORGE MCCAIN.

MADDEN

George? George McCain! Why are you back in Pittsburgh?

McCain throws newspapers on Madden's desk.

MCCAIN

Nellie Bly. I'm your New York correspondent, right? Why is she in New York writing stories for you?

MADDEN

She just does these things. Not long ago she appointed herself our correspondent in Mexico.

MCCAIN

Well, get her out of New York!

MADDEN

And how do I do that? You're not the only one she's tormenting. She did a story on the editors of the big papers - they said women couldn't write or cover dangerous stories, she made fools out of all of them.

MCCAIN

I worked long and hard to get that position in New York. And since Bly arrived, the Dispatch has carried more of her reports, than mine.

MADDEN

Sorry. But they're good. She's getting better as a reporter.

MCCAIN

That's wonderful. Now let her go do it somewhere else. There are thirty seven other states she can report from - let her pick one and go there.

MADDEN

What happened to that story she was working on, in the park?

MCCAIN

There's a man in the park, he entices women into a carriage, and then he drugs them and rapes them.

MADDEN

And she got the story?

MCCAIN

Not yet. She's trying to reel him in, using a little bait.

MADDEN

What is she using as bait?...She's using herself as bait, isn't she?

MCCAIN

Six nights in the park already. All alone.

MADDEN

What the hell is the matter with you? Didn't you stop her?

MCCAIN

Have you ever tried to stop Nellie Bly from hunting down a story?

MADDEN

Goddamn it!

He runs into the outer office.

MADDEN (CONT'D)

Boy, don't move, you're making a run to the telegraph. Alice, write this down. Night watch, New York Police. Young woman in Central Park, in mortal danger...

EXT. CENTRAL PARK - NIGHT

Bly looks at a creepy STRANGER with a flask.

NELLIE

Mister, like I said, I really need to find my way back to the avenue.

STRANGER

Give me your arm, I have a carriage around the corner.

They survey each other.

STRANGER (CONT'D)

You're not cold, are you? Got brandy if you like...

NELLIE

Could I see your flask? I've heard about a flask like this one.

She takes it, looks it over and smiles.

NELLIE (CONT'D)

My lucky day. You wouldn't have a match? Got one of those newfangled cigarettes, would you like one?

STRANGER

Why, I sure do. Don't forget the brandy.

She looks at him again. She puts the brandy in her purse and pulls out a whistle. Blows hard.

NELLIE

Sergeant, just like we practiced it.

The stranger grabs her and throws her to the ground. A dozen policemen appear and grab him. Nellie gets up.

NELLIE (CONT'D)

Let's see em try to keep me off the front page now.

OFFICER

Miss, those Pittsburgh people sent you a telegram. Do not wire more copy, come home immediately.

NELLIE

Yes, I'll to do exactly as I'm told.

(pause, then explodes in laughter)

Can you direct me to the offices of the New York World?

INT. NEWSPAPER OFFICE - DAY

The fancy editorial office of the New York World; Nellie sits in the chair of editor JOHN COCKERILL who is entering.

COCKERILL

Make yourself at home... You're that crazy girl who was almost shot in Mexico?

NELLIE

Yes, Mister Cockerill.

COCKERILL

The last time somebody ambushed me in my office, he had a gun. I shot him dead.

NELLIE

New York is a tough little town.

COCKERILL

It's not usual to find a girl with  
your pluck in a place like  
Pittsburgh.

NELLIE

A lot you know about Pittsburgh.

COCKERILL

Why are you here annoying me? This  
is not some Pittsburgh broadsheet.  
You want a job filing, or tidying  
the place, the hiring office is...

NELLIE

I want to write for you.

COCKERILL

Nobody's going to hire a 23-year-  
old girl to...

NELLIE

I've got to write. I can't do  
anything else. Its like breathing  
to me.

COCKERILL

No policeman will let a female  
reporter run into danger at a fire  
or a crime scene, a bar, a riot.

NELLIE

Where AM I allowed to go?

COCKERILL

This is a big city newsroom, like a  
locker room at a men's club. One of  
those boys try to stand you up  
against a wall some quiet night.

NELLIE

He won't try that more than once.

He scrutinizes her for a moment.

COCKERILL

I can give you a twenty-five dollar  
retainer. Maybe Pulitzer will let  
you mail in some articles, keep you  
out of the newsroom.

NELLIE

I got ideas - I can sail to Europe,  
write about it when I get back --

COCKERILL

This is insane.

NELLIE

Insane?

He holds up a finger while he thinks.

COCKERILL

Insane. Sh... You're going to get yourself committed to the lunatic asylum on Blackwell's Island. You should fit right in.

NELLIE

What in God's name are you -

She finally gets it.

NELLIE (CONT'D)

...Ahh... And how will you get me out, after I once get in?

COCKERILL

I don't know.

NELLIE

You don't -- Seven days, Mister. It's a lunatic asylum! You will get me out in seven days. I want to hear you say it.

COCKERILL

Seven days, no matter what. Then write a story. We hear they're abusing the inmates.

NELLIE

So, I have to persuade them I'm insane. Half the people back in Pittsburgh already think I'm crazy.

COCKERILL

New York has more crazy people than any ten places you can think of. To stand out you need to really be a loon.

INT. APARTMENT - DAY

MONTAGE: Nellie practicing insanity in a mirror.

Amnesia -- Who am I? I can't remember!

Hallucinations, screams

DTs and invisible bugs - Get them off me!

Messes rudely with the hair and clothes

Conversation with her "multiple personalities"

Giggles

Waving around a knife

Dancing

Paranoia -- You talkin' to me?

Laughs and shrugs at the mirror at the end.

INT. TAVERN - NIGHT

Nellie has her arms around JIMMY METCALFE, a theater critic, trying to calm him down, but he's angry.

NELLIE

Come on, Jimmy. Let's go home.

JIMMY

It was bad enough before - I never even know where you are. But this...I'm asking. Don't do this.

NELLIE

The asylum?

JIMMY

It's dangerous. What if I went to the asylum instead?

NELLIE

You're a drama critic.

JIMMY

And you're -

NELLIE

I'm what?

JIMMY

Nellie.

NELLIE

What?

JIMMY

Where is all this going? How long  
are you going to keep doing this?

NELLIE

Long as they let me. That's my  
fear: they stop printing my stories  
I'll have to go live like every  
other girl. Chained up to a stove.

JIMMY

You can chase stories, or have a  
home. Don't see how you do both.  
You're not afraid of having tea for  
one, for the rest of your life?

She puts her arm around him.

NELLIE

If I can't go out and do what I do,  
I'll stop breathing. My heart will  
stop. If you got this picture in  
your head, me at home stirring a  
pot, you may not be the man for me.

JIMMY

The man you're looking for may not  
be out there.

NELLIE

You think I don't know that?...Take  
me home, put your arms around me. I  
don't want to think about the  
future now. I'm going into that  
asylum.

EXT. STREET - NIGHT

A boardinghouse GUEST is on the front steps with the OWNER.  
They scan the street.

GUEST

That girl disappeared hours ago.

OWNER

I saw her out front round midnight.

GUEST

There she is. ...Hey, are you lost?

Nellie is walking down the street in a daze.

OWNER

This is it, you found it, this is  
where you're staying!

GUEST

What's her name?

OWNER

She never told us. Just paid up and  
moved in.

Nellie runs, looking back to make sure they're watching and  
following. And they are.

INT. BOARDINGHOUSE - DAY

Inside the house the owner and guests surround Nellie  
nervously.

GUEST

My God, is that her again?

She waves a knife.

NELLIE

You're demented, every one of you!  
You'll be stabbing me in my sleep  
some night!

She breaks free and runs.

EXT. BOARDINGHOUSE - NIGHT

Owner and guests find Nellie sitting on the stairs.

OWNER

Good God, now what?

NELLIE

Please, don't hurt me, please!

INT. BOARDINGHOUSE - NIGHT

Owner and guests surround Nellie. Nellie looks for an avenue  
of escape.

OWNER

What's your name?

NELLIE

I don't know.

OWNER

Come on, now, it's just your -

NELLIE

I don't know! Who are you?

OWNER

Where did you come from?

GUEST

Got a father, a husband?

SECOND GUEST

Call the police. A doctor.

GUEST

Why don't you tell me where that  
knife is, before you hurt yourself?

INT. COURTROOM - DAY

JUDGE hears DOCTOR's testimony regarding Nellie. The  
boardinghouse people are there to testify also. Nellie acts  
wildly, wrapped in a blanket. Policemen wait in the back.

DOCTOR

Your Honor, this girl checked into  
a boardinghouse, started screaming  
all night, waving a knife around.

JUDGE

Looks like she's been  
drugged...What's your name, girl?

NELLIE

I can't remember anything!...  
(flash of insight)  
I come...from Cuba!  
(coo-ba)

JUDGE

From Cuba?  
(cube-a)

NELLIE

No, Senor. Cuba.  
(coob-a)  
From the Hacienda.

DOCTOR

Are you a woman of the town?

She slaps him.

DOCTOR (CONT'D)

Do you hear voices at night?

NELLIE

So much talking I cannot sleep -  
they talk about me, and then they  
talk about other things that do not  
interest me half so much... Somebody  
stole my trunk! Where is my trunk!

OWNER

Please, this is a nice girl, the  
asylum would kill her, don't send  
her there!

NELLIE

(under her breath)  
Criminy, belt up, lady!

DOCTOR

Delusions, dull apathetic state,  
twitching of her hands and arms,  
loss of memory, it's hysteria.  
She's demented. As a doctor I would  
have to call this a hopeless case.

Bly, hiding behind the blanket, begins to shake, bent over.

BOARDINGHOUSE GUEST

You let her loose, I ain't staying  
in that house no more. She'll  
murder us before morning.

SECOND GUEST

I had a nightmare about her!

JUDGE

She must be somebody's darling.  
Take her to Blackwell's, it's their  
problem now. Here, what are you up  
to?

Doctor pulls away the blanket, finds Bly helpless with  
laughter.

DOCTOR

She's way round the bend.

NELLIE

Oh my God, this is impossible.

DOCTOR

A sad case indeed.

GUEST

Yes it is.

JUDGE

A tragedy.

Bly brays with laughter as they lead her out.

NELLIE

Adios, senor!

DOCTOR

We'll get her on the 5:45 ferry.

NELLIE

Nope, it's 6:15 on Fridays.

She winces at her mistake; they stare at her and she returns to her act.

NELLIE (CONT'D)

They're crazy! They'll kill me!

And they resume leading her out.

WOMAN WITH NEWSPAPER

Who is this insane girl? Who is the mysterious waif with the wild hunted look in her eyes?

More Nellie laughter as they lead her out. The judge sees another woman in court, with a horrible black eye.

JUDGE

You again.

INJURED WOMAN

This time I think he broke a bone.  
I need help!

JUDGE

You want to go to Blackwells too? I can send you out there for any reason or no reason.

(opens a ledger and reads)

This is my Blackwell book. I've sent women to the asylum for bad treatment by the husband, desertion by the husband, rape, grief, menopause, jealousy, masturbation, laziness, taking a contraceptive, novel reading, overactive mind, egotism, greed, religion, tobacco, asthma.

(MORE)

JUDGE (CONT'D)

You can grow old out there with the crazy ladies, or you can go back home where you belong.

EXT. EAST RIVER - NIGHT

Nellie, hands cuffed, wrapped in a blanket, being ferried to Blackwells. She has convinced them she's insane, so she is dialing back the act, observing. The boat lists precariously when a wave hits it; she looks at her cuffed hands and is suddenly terrified. She hangs onto her seat.

INT. ASYLUM - DAY

In a large room is a string of inmates, tied together with rope. Nellie, in a corner, eats, then sets aside her gruel. Against a wall, a girl named ALICE tries to avoid the eye of the nurses. In another corner, ANNE NEVILLE, a young inmate, wild, constantly looking over her shoulder. NURSE GRADY and other NURSES watch warily.

NELLIE

God, it's awful.

Anne pulls her aside.

ANNE

No! Eat all the gruel you can, else you'll die of thirst - the water is bad, just like the meat.

NELLIE

Who are you --

ANNE

Don't take food to bed. And you shouldn't sleep alone. Especially you.

NELLIE

What do you mean, sleep alone?

Anne takes Nellie's shoulders, looks at her, lifts her chin, straightens her dress with a yank.

ANNE

Got yourself quite a figure. So...no no no, don't sleep alone. ...Look out, here come the water buckets. Against the wall. Don't say a word.

NELLIE

What if I have a complaint?

ANNE

Better have a complaint, than have a complaint and a cracked skull.

NELLIE

The nurses are mistreating us. Why don't we tell the doctor?

ANNE

That's why.

Anne points. The nurses pull out sticks.

GRADY

Alice, what did I tell you? You don't talk to the doctors, you don't complain to the doctors!

Two nurses hit Alice with sticks.

GRADY (CONT'D)

Tie her to the line for a week.

Alice is tied to the end of the rope. The roped women, with bruises and scratches, begin fighting, pulling hair, spitting, scratching, biting. The nurses blast them with buckets of water, and then go after the one wildest woman with sticks. The women fall asleep slowly in a wet heap.

ANNE

The same show every night. Now we can get some shut-eye.

NELLIE

So we can't go to the doctors?

ANNE

What good would that do?

NELLIE

They could examine us. I don't think I'm crazy, do you?

ANNE

Nobody thinks they're crazy. Nobody ever leaves. Not alive. The doctors aren't here to help you. I tried. All I got for my troubles was three nurses with broom handles.

Nurse Grady hears them talking, crosses over, and gives Nellie a long look over.

INT. ASYLUM - NIGHT

Nellie watches the main room from her bed. An OLD WOMAN, blind and wearing a flimsy rag, is walking to the nurse's room, knowing the path from long experience, but still terrified.

GRADY

Well, the blind one found us again.

NURSE

We should move the nurse's room.  
The wallbangers keep finding us.

OLD WOMAN

Please, I just need a blanket -

The nurses move across the main hall silently.

GRADY

Sorry, dear, we couldn't hear you.

The woman clumsily makes her way across the chair-strewn hall; the nurses laugh.

OLD WOMAN

Please, someone took my blanket,  
it's cold in there -

The nurses close in and grab her.

NURSE

What you got under that shimmy?

The nurses prod her under her rag. They shove her to her bed. A FRENCH WOMAN emerges in the hall.

ANNE

(whispers)

French girl. Got sick in a boarding house, ended up in a police station, couldn't make herself understood, and zoom! Here she is.

FRENCH WOMAN

Je vous en prie!...Je suis malade!  
...J'ai un rhume! La grippe!

The nurses beat her, push her back into her room.

NELLIE

Wait, she just said she's sick -

NURSE

They're like streetcars, another one comes out every five minutes.

NELLIE

That girl, there's nothing wrong with her --

ANNE

No, don't --

Nellie steps out of the shadows and speaks up.

NELLIE

She's just sick, she's French -

NURSE

This new kid, I told her the rules.

Grady, truncheon out, pushes Nellie to the wall.

GRADY

She needs another lesson. Put her in line for the bath.

NELLIE

The bath. Thank God.

The nurses laugh.

INT. BATHING ROOM - NIGHT

It's dark and loaded with nurses, armed with sticks. Already bathed women are lined up in damp shifts. A nurse shoves Nellie into the room.

NURSE

Alright, off with it.

Nellie is looking at the tub and the towel. And the women who have just bathed in it, now with their ragged clothes over their damp bodies.

NELLIE

Are we all using the same towel?

NURSE

Same towel. Same water.

NELLIE

Some of those girl have sores on them. The water's filthy.

GRADY

You need a thorough scrubbing.

NURSE

Off with it, I said.

Nellie strips, steps into the tub. And shrieks.

NELLIE

Freezing. It smells like vomit.

The nurses push her in, scrub her with brushes.

NELLIE (CONT'D)

Oh God, that's cold!

NURSE

Cold? Ha. Wait til we rinse you.

The nurses push her head under the water. Nellie thrashes. Nurses laugh.

GRADY

Dunk her again. Educational purposes.

They pull her head out and begin pouring buckets of ice water on her head. She screams.

NELLIE

I can't breathe. You're drowning me. I can't breathe!

The nurses begin roughing combing her hair, some of which comes out. A nurse hands her the towel.

NURSE

You can use the community towel or you can get dressed wet. Your choice.

GRADY

Bring her over here.

They do.

GRADY (CONT'D)

Let me know the next time you want to give us a French lesson.

INT. ASYLUM - NIGHT

Nellie wakes up screaming as rats steal her bread.

NELLIE

Who's there?

ANNE

Told you. Keep food in bed, the rats come. Did they leave you any?

NELLIE

Still got some.

ANNE

Check the inside first. Any bugs?

Nellie finds a spider inside her bread, screams.

ANNE (CONT'D)

Relax. Spider's dead. Gonna eat that?

NELLIE

The bread or the spider?

ANNE

If you'd moved a little faster, we could have eaten the rat.

NELLIE

You're joking.

ANNE

You new girls.

NELLIE

Good God, how safe is this place? What if there's a fire?

ANNE

(skeptical)

According to the doctor, if there's a fire, the nurses will absolutely stop to open our doors before they run for the hills.

NELLIE

Is there anything to read, a book, a game of drafts, a pack of cards?

Anne laughs.

ANNE

We spend all day on benches in that freezing room. Just sitting. And, no fooling, pick a buddy for the night.

NELLIE

(wary)

A buddy? For the night?

ANNE

Relax, I'm in the asylum, but not for THAT. I sort of smell too much anyway. You get to change your clothes once a month.

NELLIE

You're not insane at all, are you?

ANNE

I don't think so. Course, none of us do...I got sick from overwork and went to the Sisters Home; money ran out and they flung me in here.

NELLIE

I saw those three German girls...

ANNE

One of them was put here by her husband, said she was cheating, another was a maid got in an argument, they called the police -

NELLIE

Just a stupid argument is all it took?

ANNE

Another girl was beaten to death.

NELLIE

And why are you helping me?

ANNE

Because you're going to give me your bread ration next week.

NELLIE

What if I want to keep my bread?

ANNE

What if you want to keep your teeth?... You just do what I tell you, I'll take good care of you.

NELLIE

Don't you worry about me. Someone's coming for me, to take me away.

ANNE

Do I crush your fairy tale now, or wait for it to die on its own? No one is coming to take you away. This is where they take you away to.

INT. ASYLUM - NIGHT

Nellie asleep on a wood-frame bed. The NIGHT WATCHMAN arrives and she awakens, sits up.

WATCHMAN

Good Lord have mercy.

NELLIE

Who's there?

WATCHMAN

Fresh from the farm. Look at you.

They look at each other.

NELLIE

Who are you?

WATCHMAN

Night watchman. Past midnight, I'm king of this whole island.

NELLIE

What do you -

He touches her chin, then her shoulders.

WATCHMAN

I'm a man you want to know real good. This can be a rough place at night. Need a friend to look out for you.

Anne enters.

ANNE

She's already got a friend,  
flatfoot.

WATCHMAN

What are you going to do about it?

ANNE

Want to find out? There's two of  
us.

WATCHMAN

Can't watch her forever. I'm like  
the man on the ferry boat, always  
get my fee. Go see that French gal.  
She can say thank you in two  
languages.

He leaves. Nellie is terrified.

ANNE

Now do you see? Never sleep alone.

NELLIE

You can have all the bread you  
want.

ANNE

Slide over. Just before sunrise,  
he'll come back. If you start  
snoring on me, you can deal with  
him yourself. Relax, I don't bite.

INT. ASYLUM - DAY

McCain enters the dayroom with Grady who is holding a  
truncheon; Anne runs to a corner.

MCCAIN

I'm looking for my fiancée...Nellie!

Nellie pulls him aside.

NELLIE

Shhh! Mister McCain - please,  
you've got to cover for me, I'm  
sorry about the -

MCCAIN

Shhh.

Long silence; he looks at her.

MCCAIN (CONT'D)  
No, she's not here... I'll keep  
looking.

McCain exits. Grady approaches Nellie and pokes her in the chest with the truncheon.

GRADY  
Want another bath? Watch your step.

ANNE  
Cough it up. Who was that man?

NELLIE  
They said they were coming to get  
me in seven days. It's been nine.

ANNE  
What if they don't come at all?

INT. ASYLUM - DAY

A doctor enters the dayroom with John Cockerill; Grady, now frightened, follows.

GRADY  
Honest, we had no idea who she was.

COCKERILL  
That was the idea.

GRADY  
A reporter. Jesus. If we'da known...

COCKERILL  
Nellie!

She throws her arms around Cockerill.

COCKERILL (CONT'D)  
Good lord, Nellie -

And then she slaps him, hard.

NELLIE  
You promised me. You told me seven  
days. Seven! It's been ten days...

COCKERILL  
I'm sorry. It was endless. Ever  
seen a doctor argue with a lawyer?

NELLIE

I just knew you were coming Day  
Seven. Then Day Eight. Day Nine.

She hugs him again, crying.

NELLIE (CONT'D)

The longest three days of my life.

She runs to Anne.

NELLIE (CONT'D)

Anne. I'll be back, I promise.

NELLIE (CONT'D)

(to Grady)

I'm coming back. You watch your  
step.

She hugs Anne and leaves with Cockerill.

EXT. NEWSPAPER OFFICE - DAY

Jimmy Metcalfe exits his building and Nellie, waiting out on  
the sidewalk, kisses him.

NELLIE

Been waiting to do that all night.

JIMMY

Nellie, I'm working tonight.

NELLIE

It's Hamlet, sweetie. Not to ruin  
it for you, but everybody dies.

JIMMY

They're doing the whole play, no  
cuts.

NELLIE

If I snore, poke me.

JIMMY

I gotta stay awake so I can review  
it. I heard he's good, but Ophelia  
is a mess.

NELLIE

Come over for a snort after?

JIMMY  
Time they finish, it'll be  
breakfast.

NELLIE  
I've made you breakfast before.

JIMMY  
Cook in a kitchen. It's  
so...traditional of you.

NELLIE  
Don't start. Come over, keep me  
warm tonight. Don't give me a lot  
of hooraw about it.

JIMMY  
You scared the hell out of me,  
Nellie. I read your story on the  
asylum...Jesus.

He stops at a tavern.

NELLIE  
One more block.

JIMMY  
It's my favorite saloon.

NELLIE  
They don't let women drink there.

EXT. DECK OF A FERRY BOAT - DAY

Boat crossing the Hudson. A tiny girl named TRUDY looks up to see Nellie standing on the stern rail of the boat, wearing a coat and deerstalker hat.

TRUDY  
Oh my saints!

NELLIE  
What's your name, girlie?

TRUDY  
Gertrude.

NELLIE  
My sympathies. Oh, captain!

CAPTAIN  
What the hell do you want now?

NELLIE

You were saying you haven't been late for a run in two months?

CAPTAIN

Seventy days, haven't missed a landing.

The captain sees where she is, and quickly shifts from irritation to panic.

NELLIE

Aw. You can start over tomorrow. Here, Trudy, hold my lucky hat.

Nellie tosses the girl her deerstalker, theatrically sticks her leg out over the water and falls in. There is an unmistakable splash.

CAPTAIN

Goddamn it, stop the engine!

TRUDY

That was bully! Mummy, can I go for a swim too?

INT. NEWSPAPER OFFICE - DAY

Nellie visiting the Pittsburgh Dispatch. She's congested. Erasmus and Bessie are editing.

ERASMUS

Nellie! You're back in Pittsburgh!

NELLIE

Just visiting some family.

ERASMUS

And gloating, just a bit?...You alright?

NELLIE

Head cold...You've read about the ferry boat in New York harbor?

ERASMUS

Um...yes?

NELLIE

I kept trying to get answers from the ferry crews on the Hudson, about how they handle emergencies...

ERASMUS

Okay...

NELLIE

What happens when someone falls overboard. I got what I always get with these types - "don't worry your pretty little head about it..."

ERASMUS

I don't like where this is going...

NELLIE

And finally I decided there was only one way to get an answer...

ERASMUS

(winces)  
You didn't...

NELLIE

Of course. I jumped overboard.

ERASMUS

Well, of course you did.

NELLIE

Well, what else was I supposed to do?... They did a fine job fishing me out of the water.

ERASMUS

Bravo.

NELLIE

And banned me from the ferry for a month.

ERASMUS

You know the factories and meat-packers dump raw sewage in the Hudson?

NELLIE

Yes, I was in the bath all day, I had to burn my dress. Could I have a little nip of brandy?

ERASMUS

Drinking? God forbid. Then you might lose your inhibitions.

She sees he's joking and laughs.

ERASMUS (CONT'D)

You watch your back. Your asylum story was a national scandal - every reporter in town wants to put a knife in your back. Jealous.

NELLIE

(reads an article)

Darn tootin'. "What, excepting torture, would produce insanity quicker than this treatment? Take a sane and healthy woman, shut her up and make her sit from 6 a.m. til 8 p.m. on benches, do not allow her to talk or move, give her no reading, bad food, harsh treatment, see how long it will take to make her insane." When I went to the asylum, I stopped acting crazy. I acted normally, and the more I did, they more sure they were, that I was insane.

ERASMUS

Imagine that.

NELLIE

A grand jury is demanding more training for the asylums, and better testing so that only the insane go in there. And women doctors, if they can find any.

ERASMUS

You'll like this one, I think.

(reads)

"Even the great editors of New York have been caught. They scarcely got done saying women could not cross the great gulf that separated them from reporters of the first order, when behold, Nellie performs a feat that few men have equaled. She showed that cool courage, consummate craft and investigating ability are not monopolized by men."

NELLIE

Who wrote it?

BESSIE

I did.

Bessie is entering; Nellie rises.

NELLIE

Bessie.

BESSIE

You called Erasmus a Philistine,  
and he became your best friend. You  
poached on McCain's turf in New  
York, and he covered for you in the  
asylum. You got shirty with me  
about the YMCA, and ...

She gestures to the article.

BESSIE (CONT'D)

I backed you up, here in  
Pittsburgh, still can't figure out  
why I did that. How do you do that?

Nellie looks sweetly at her.

BESSIE (CONT'D)

Don't beat your eyelashes at me,  
I'm immune.

NELLIE

Are you, now?

INT. NEWSPAPER OFFICE - DAY

Nellie brings Anne to Cockerill's office. Cockerill rises.

NELLIE

John, this is Anne Neville, just  
finished testifying to the grand  
jury about Blackwells.

COCKERILL

The doctor who runs the place, he  
was on the stand too, wasn't he?

ANNE

The doctor lied, he complained that  
he didn't have enough money -

NELLIE

He claimed the girl with the black  
eye got hit before she arrived -

COCKERILL

But things are changing in the  
asylum, right?

ANNE

Once your story came out, the nurses panicked - we get good food, clothes...and the beatings stop.

COCKERILL

Well, that's good, isn't it?

ANNE

They're hiding the truth. They are making women disappear. Some girls got moved to another hospital -

NELLIE

Or just dumped on the street -

ANNE

One of the girls had a baby in March. The baby disappeared. That girl will never see her baby again.

NELLIE

My flat is on 96th, take the train to where Broadway turns into a dirt road...Nice to share a flat, have somebody waiting. Everybody expects me to make a home and stay there, but somehow it never happens.

ANNE

I'll put some food together. I AM glad I didn't punch out your teeth.

NELLIE

Yes, I'm glad too...Punch out my teeth? You and what army?

They laugh, quick hug.

ANNE

See ya tonight, crazy girl.

She exits doing a little crazy dance.

NELLIE

I don't know how we got away with this. They dragged me into the police station, Captain McCullagh was there -

COCKERILL

He didn't recognize you?

NELLIE

No!

COCKERILL

And they almost called in reporters to figure out who you were... they would have cooked your goose in a minute! So what are you doing next?

MONTAGE.

Nellie dressed as a cowgirl.

Singing and dancing as a chorus girl.

Meeting Hellen Keller.

Falling off a bicycle.

INT. GYMNASIUM - DAY

Nellie does sit-ups with JOHN L. SULLIVAN; they both wear shabby, shapeless exercise clothes.

NELLIE

Fracturing my back with John L. Sullivan. Where do you do most of your training?

SULLIVAN

Barn up north. Gets chilly.

NELLIE

You fight with gloves and bare-knuckle?

SULLIVAN

Get older, I like the gloves.

NELLIE

Feeling your age?

SULLIVAN

Some fights go 80 rounds. Don't know how long I can keep it up. Hey, keep up!

NELLIE

Just catching my breath.

SULLIVAN

You know the deal. I answer questions long as you keep training.

NELLIE

I must be insane. You do this every day?

SULLIVAN

Try training with a hangover. My manager says the only thing that can beat me is liquor.

NELLIE

Is he right?

SULLIVAN

I'm Irish. Jaysus, I'm telling you things I never told a reporter before. Don't know how you do it.

NELLIE

Could be you just like girls.

SULLIVAN

Well, sure I do today.

BOXERS enter; a tiny boxer sees Nellie.

BOXER

You let a girl in here?

SULLIVAN

What's it to you?

BOXER

This is a men's club!

SULLIVAN

Alright, give the girl a few minutes in the locker room to change, and you can go in.

BOXER

We can't go in the locker room?

SULLIVAN

Anybody goes in there while she's changing, goes in the ring with me.

BOXER

Did she spar with you then?

NELLIE

I weight 112, he's twice my size.  
How much do you weigh, Big Mouth?  
130? I'll spar with you.

BOXER

What?

She touches the boxer's face. He smiles.

NELLIE

Bare knuckle, or gloves? You afraid  
I'll hurt that pretty little nose?

BOXER

You go change. Get you a pint  
after.

NELLIE

And then you tell me about  
Sullivan.

INT. NEWSPAPER OFFICE - DAY

Cockerill and Nellie read articles. She has commandeered his  
desk. Cockerill glances at her.

COCKERILL

The other reporters out there are  
still giving you grief?

NELLIE

Now they're brassed off I got the  
interview with Sullivan, the boxer.  
I even got to train with him.

COCKERILL

You get into the ring with him??

NELLIE

God no, he hits like a pile driver.  
I'm reckless, not suicidal. I just  
exercised with him. Even that  
almost killed me. But he won't talk  
to other reporters, so the boys are  
looking daggers at me...

COCKERILL

You created a new kind of  
reporting, you get stories the  
other guys can't. Need help?

NELLIE

Usually your boys are sweet. We eat, we play poker, we drink until dawn, then they walk me home and leave me to myself. I still feel like a fish out of water.

COCKERILL

Jumping out of the water was your idea... This town doesn't have a place to put a girl like you... That story on the jail, you got strip-searched, thrown in with the men - did they hire a female matron?

NELLIE

Soon.

COCKERILL

We're doing a retrospective - best stories of the year. Can I have my chair back? ...You went to the wild west show -

They swap chairs and sort articles.

NELLIE

Chorus girl. I still have offers to go on the stage!

COCKERILL

And talked to that Lockwood woman who ran for president in 1888. As though that will ever happen.

NELLIE

I got mail about the article on women proposing marriage to men...

COCKERILL

Excited women or terrified men?

NELLIE

Yes.

COCKERILL

One board member insists Nellie is really an entire team of male reporters. When was your last day off?

NELLIE

Three years ago. I love doing this....I hired a spy to follow my so-called husband.

COCKERILL

Who did the spy follow?

She smiles at him, looks down.

COCKERILL (CONT'D)

Dammit, Nellie!

NELLIE

Count your blessings, he didn't find a thing. You really are dull, John.

COCKERILL

Compared to you, a prison riot is dull. Once in a while, I like to have a dull day. Since you arrived, they've been few and far between.

He scans articles.

COCKERILL (CONT'D)

You pretended you were in the market to buy a child..

(chuckles)

You tried to learn how to ride a bicycle. Is your shin better..?

NELLIE

Oh shut up.

COCKERILL

Went to a haunted house, hunting ghosts.

NELLIE

You were right, that was stupid, sorry.

COCKERILL

Twenty other times I stopped you doing something dangerous and suicidal.

NELLIE

I won't tell the boys that I wear the pants in this marriage. All the times I brought you a great story after you told me to back off.

COCKERILL

And what happens to Jimmy Metcalfe while all this is going on?

NELLIE

John, just - let's not go into it.

COCKERILL

Trouble?

NELLIE

Every big story I do, he's got this burning need to cut me down to size.

COCKERILL

Is he knocking your stories?

NELLIE

He can't believe I'm doing what I'm doing.

COCKERILL

Neither can I.

NELLIE

I caught that crooked lobbyist, all Jimmy says is "he was riding for a fall, somebody was bound to catch him".

COCKERILL

You probably got a dozen people telling you to go marry Jimmy, put on an apron. I'll hold my fire...

REPORTER

(entering)

Mr. Cockerill. Hate to break it to you. It's two days away.

COCKERILL

(to Nellie)

You're not going to like this one.

INT. NEWSPAPER OFFICE - DAY

Continuation. Nellie follows Cockerill into the newsroom where he reads a report.

COCKERILL

Remember we talked about sending someone to travel around the world?

NELLIE

Jules Verne wrote the story about doing it in eighty days, we want to beat that, you said it's dangerous for a woman to travel by herself -

COCKERILL

It IS dangerous, Nellie.

NELLIE

-- and no woman could do it without a dozen trunks of clothes.

COCKERILL

Nellie --

NELLIE

Swear to God, you send a man, I'll make the trip for another paper. And I'll beat your guy. Serious.

COCKERILL

You'd be on your own for months...

She shrugs.

COCKERILL (CONT'D)

We found out that there's a man who said he's going to try the trip, soon, but he's not a reporter.

NELLIE

Great guns!...Please! I promise, I can go myself, I'll travel light --

COCKERILL

Calm down and listen for once.

(long pause)

Pulitzer's going to fire me for sure. I'm willing to let you go -

Nellie screams with delight.

COCKERILL (CONT'D)

But to beat the other man, you've got to go in two days. Otherwise, it's no deal.

NELLIE

Two days!...Oh my God!

Rushes out.

COCKERILL

I take it you accept, then...

INT. CAPTAIN'S TABLE ABOARD AN OCEAN LINER - DAY

CAPTAIN and rich guests eat lunch. OFFICER enters.

CAPTAIN

Should we go check on her?

OFFICER

She swears at me and chases me away. And then keeps vomiting over the rail.

CAPTAIN

She's been doing this for days. Did you switch her to bread and milk?

OFFICER

That IS the bread and milk. When she gets to England, she may as well give up, go back the America.

CAPTAIN

Why would she do that?

OFFICER

Most of her trip is on ships. Her body can't do this for three months, she'll end up in some awful Chinese hospital. She has no one to help - she's sailing by herself.

Nellie enters, white as a sheet. She is wearing her round-the-world dress, which she will wear for all of her trip when she's not undressed. Everyone applauds.

NELLIE

I want you all to die. I tried the stupid bread. Get me a brandy - get this taste out of my mouth. Milk!

OFFICER

Please take my advice. Once we reach London, just go back home.

NELLIE

If I go back to New York, I might as well keep going all the way back to Pittsburgh. Admit failure.

COOK enters.

COOK

Captain, the machine is working, we  
can serve ice cream now!

NELLIE

Captain, promote this girl  
immediately. Brandy AND ice cream.  
And no, I'm not going home.

INT. TRAIN CAR - DAY

Outside Calais, France. Bly chats with a TRAIN PASSENGER. She  
is wearing her deerstalker hat, a carpetbag next to her.

NELLIE

How long does this train take to  
get from Calais to Brindisi?

TRAIN PASSENGER

Depends. The last time the train  
ran, it was robbed by bandits.

NELLIE

Robbed? Why didn't they say  
something at the station?

TRAIN PASSENGER

Well they want your money  
obviously. Did I give you that much  
of a fright? You're awfully pale.

NELLIE

Actually I was ill the whole way  
over from America.

TRAIN PASSENGER

By yourself? Got men bothering you?

NELLIE

Just on the train I've gotten two  
marriage proposals. One of the men  
was astounded that I could travel  
with just the one case.

TRAIN PASSENGER

How do you do that?

NELLIE

I have only one dress --

TRAIN PASSENGER

One dress, for the whole trip?

NELLIE

Yep. A coat, veils, a bodice and other lady bits, a robe, pens and paper, money - got my lucky ring!

TRAIN PASSENGER

You must have forgot something.

NELLIE

If I do I just buy it. Always pack fewer clothes and more money...My newspaper wanted me to take a pistol.

TRAIN PASSENGER

Newspaper...You're Nellie Bly! Trying to beat Phineas Fogg, 80 days!

NELLIE

Shh! Actually I'm going to meet Jules Verne in France.

TRAIN PASSENGER

Eighty days. No woman could do that. No man has ever done it.

NELLIE

Maybe it can't be done by a man.

BERTHE MORISOT, painter, 47, enters.

NELLIE (CONT'D)

Madame Morisot! Thank you for seeing me!

MORISOT

Viens, cher.

INT. SHIP CABIN - DAY

Continuation. Morisot's cabin contains a number of her sketches. Nellie follows her in. During this bit you could show off some of Morisot's paintings.

MORISOT

On my way back to Paris. A few new paintings to exhibit.

NELLIE

I'm surprised -- you made your name in the exhibits, you could have played it safe, instead you joined the renegades, the Impressionists.

MORISOT

Nobody's going to tell me how to paint.

NELLIE

I look at your paintings, trying to see signs of Manet's influence...

MORISOT

Don't tell anyone, because it would ruin Manet. But it was ME, steering HIM along when he was struggling. Helping with his composition, his style, paintings outdoors, got him to join the Impressionists.

NELLIE

But Manet helped you too...?

MORISOT

Oh, yes, he's extraordinary.

NELLIE

It's alright for you to get help from Manet, but if people knew you helped him, it would ruin him?

MORISOT

The art world is a strange place, and it can be ugly sometimes, in the midst of all that beauty...

NELLIE

Many of your paintings are about women and girls...

MORISOT

Partly for my husband. I have a career, out in the world painting, it's embarrassing. There are homes he isn't invited to. Marriage is a funny thing. So, I steer clear of a few things. I don't do nude paintings or wild city scenes like Renoir, I don't spend long hours in studios painting men...

NELLIE

So there was a bit of sacrifice...

MORISOT

No. You of all people should know better.

(MORE)

MORISOT (CONT'D)

Men paint the things they think are important - gods and kings, naked women. I paint women dressing their children, girls picking cherries, a girl learning to read. All my women, my girls, you think their stories are not worth telling?

NELLIE

Boy am I stupid.

MORISOT

Like me when I was your age. Go find a story like that. Then another and another.

NELLIE

Right.

MORISOT

Assuming you get home alive. Travelling around the world, just to come back to where you started - now that is stupid.

A pause, and they laugh.

NELLIE

If I have to choose between spending fifty years with an iron in my hand, or living my way and getting killed off when I'm 30...

MORISOT

We'll talk again when you're 29.

EXT. SHIP'S DECK - NIGHT

Aden harbor. An officer grabs the arm of a YOUNG MAN, English, wearing a towel and carrying a book. Other men wear towels also.

OFFICER

Come, you know the rules. Ladies sleep on deck on the port side, men starboard. They're all naked over there, only way to beat the heat.

YOUNG MAN

Miss Bly said she wanted a book.

OFFICER

I've got my eye on you.

YOUNG MAN

Um, knock knock.

WOMAN IN A SHEET

Dammit, here's another. Port is the left side, you great pillock, you're on the wrong side!

YOUNG MAN

Looking for Miss Bly, got her book.

WOMAN IN A SHEET

A likely story.

Nellie, naked, peers around a corner.

NELLIE

It's alright. Here, just give me that towel - awfully tiny.

She covers up with the towel. The young man looks purposefully over her head, rather than at her.

YOUNG MAN

Mark Twain, as promised.

NELLIE

You're a life saver. Didn't bring books. Never realized how many nights I'd be alone. You can stop looking at the stars. No man ever went to hell for looking at a woman's naked shoulders.

He looks at her towel.

YOUNG MAN

The road to damnation is a bit further south of your shoulders. Let's talk about Twain when we're, um, clothed.

NELLIE

If you insist. ...The English.

He walks away. She looks after him; her smile slowly fades.

EXT. SHIP'S DECK - NIGHT

Bly limps to the quarterdeck. A YEMENI WOMAN and a YOUNG GIRL appear dockside.

YEMENI WOMAN

Missus.

NELLIE

Beg pardon.

YEMENI WOMAN

Missus, a great bargain for you.

Nellie steps on the gangplank in her towel.

NELLIE

Why on earth do you have that child out of her bed at this hour?

YEMENI WOMAN

Last chance to buy before you sail.

NELLIE

Buy?

YEMENI WOMAN

The girl. Cheap price, she does anything for you. Absolutely anything.

She sees a young girl.

NELLIE

How can you - I could buy you. Take you home, set you free. ...But I can't. I'm sorry, I'm so sorry.

An officer appears.

OFFICER

Here, off you go.

The woman and girl depart. Nellie in tears.

NELLIE

Oh God. They buy and sell em here.

WOMAN IN A SHEET

Cheap commodity.

NELLIE

We fought a war to stop it. In America.

WOMAN IN A SHEET

It's a big world out there...

NELLIE

We can be thankful. It was the port side next to the dock. If she sold that girl on the men's side, the girl could have been raped and thrown into the sea.

Nellie looks past the dock into the port, and sees Arab women in their robes, only their eyes visible.

INT. HOTEL LOBBY - DAY

Sri Lanka. Nellie in manacles again, with a SRI LANKA POLICEMAN. He unlocks her. A CLERK observes.

NELLIE

I'm sorry, I didn't know the carriage was illegal.

SRI LANKA POLICEMAN

They have signs all over the harbor, miss. Do be more careful. You really wouldn't like the local prison.

CLERK

Don't know what else to tell you. You can't get out of the harbor until the Nepaul arrives.

NELLIE

May she go to the bottom, old tub! I got my schedule, why can't they keep theirs? Bring me curry in the bar. Amazing, I couldn't keep bread down, your curry hits the spot.

Nellie limps away to eat, glaring at an angry BRIT who enters.

BRIT

I want a new room please.

CLERK

Problem with your room?

BRIT

I want a room further away from that awful American woman. If you can't accommodate me, I assure you there are other hotels in Ceylon.

CLERK

It's Sri Lanka, sir.

BRIT

It's a British territory and we'll damn well call it what we like.

CLERK

Very good sir. If I may, is the woman doing something she oughtn't?

BRIT

Did you see her? She was in your club, men only, drinking and smoking at all hours! She's in there shoveling down curry like a Yukon lumberjack. How does this establishment allow such a thing?

CLERK

She seems to be very clever at overcoming resistance.

BRIT

I've been elbow-to-elbow with her since Suez. When we take stops, white people are forced to use sticks to beat away the beggars. And this American girl stopped us!

CLERK

And sometimes you use sticks to avoid paying the boatmen, by beating them.

BRIT

What on earth are you...

CLERK

You're not my first Englishman. Sah.

BRIT

She saw a magician doing tricks, acted as his assistant, helped him take our money! She's a Communard!

CLERK

Poor man probably feeding his family. You should be happy to know that the girl is Nellie Bly -

BRIT

You're joking. Around the world in  
eighty -

CLERK

She's been delayed. If she loses  
one more day, she misses her  
connection. If you're a betting  
man, the odds are against her  
getting home in time now.

BRIT

What odds are you offering on her  
arriving on time?

CLERK

What stakes are you offering?

BRIT

Can I get credit?

CLERK

You're not my first Englishman.  
Pounds sterling or gold please.

INT. SHIP'S DECK - DAY

The ship is tossing violently. Bly is bleeding from a cut on  
her forehead. She sees an OFFICER.

NELLIE

Lieutenant!

OFFICER

Get below! I'm heading to the  
bridge -

He slips.

NELLIE

Grab the railing!

OFFICER

It's a monsoon, the whole ship's  
locked down. Get in and stay there!

NELLIE

But my room's full of water!

OFFICER

They all are. Can't help you -  
captain needs help.

(MORE)

OFFICER (CONT'D)

If we're still afloat tomorrow,  
someone will bring around some dry  
towels and coffee.

EXT. SHIP'S DECK - NIGHT

Near Singapore. Sound of a monkey and a sailor both  
screaming.

Nellie sees an INSANE YOUNG MAN following her around the  
deck. This goes on for a bit.

Nellie at the rail, surveying the ocean. The insane young man  
approaches slowly. Nellie is frightened.

INSANE YOUNG MAN

Salutations. Good job we're out of  
Singapore.

NELLIE

(slowly)  
We meet again.

INSANE YOUNG MAN

All alone, aren't you? I've been  
following you.

NELLIE

I know...I saw you.

INSANE YOUNG MAN

Careful of the railing, you'll fall  
overboard...You're a beautiful girl.

NELLIE

Thank you.

Silence.

INSANE YOUNG MAN

Do you think life is worth living?

NELLIE

Yes, life is very sweet. The  
thought of death is the only thing  
that causes me unhappiness.

INSANE YOUNG MAN

You cannot understand it or you  
would feel different.

He approaches her.

INSANE YOUNG MAN (CONT'D)

I could take you in my arms and  
jump overboard, and before they  
knew it we would be...at rest.

NELLIE

(pause, grabbing the  
railing)

Um...

INSANE YOUNG MAN

I know, I can show you, I can prove  
it. Death by drowning is peaceful  
slumber, a quiet drifting away.

NELLIE

Um...officer?

An OFFICER enters.

OFFICER

Hello, Miss. Everything alright?

The young maniac slowly slips away; she slips her arm in the  
officer's, terrified.

OFFICER (CONT'D)

Good to be out of Singapore...

NELLIE

Oh God yes, when I heard we had to  
stay a whole day ...

OFFICER

Oh. Was that you shouting at my  
captain down there?

NELLIE

I can't miss my ship in Hong Kong.

OFFICER

I were captain I'd have clapped you  
in irons. Surely you didn't waste  
the visit to Singapore?

SAILOR enters, arm bandaged. Nellie limps over to the sailor,  
and is limping from now until she returns to New York.

NELLIE

Have you found my monkey?

OFFICER

Monkey?

NELLIE  
(to the officer)  
I bought a monkey.

The sailor holds up his arm.

SAILOR  
The monkey? Yes, we've met.

NELLIE  
What did you do?

SAILOR  
All I did was scream. The monkey  
did the rest. That monkey is bad  
luck - let's throw it overboard.

NELLIE  
The sailors say priests are bad  
luck. We have a minister aboard -  
toss him over, and you can have my  
monkey too...

OFFICER  
Did you talk to those newlyweds?

SAILOR  
Sorry about that sir, a bit of  
fun...

OFFICER  
Where's your pistol?

SAILOR  
I didn't want the monkey to grab it  
and pump me full of bullets. He's  
dangerous enough as it is.

OFFICER  
Good thinking, carry on.

Sailor exits.

NELLIE  
Pistol?

OFFICER  
The whole crew is armed. Last time  
through here, pirates tried to take  
us. Look, we have a shadow.

They look out at a silhouette of a ship in the distance,  
barely visible in the moonlight.

NELLIE  
Here be dragons...

OFFICER  
I'm off to the bridge.

EXT. SHIP'S BRIDGE WING - NIGHT

Continuation. They are outside the bridge. The officer calls into the bridge.

OFFICER  
The watch saw the ship?

SECOND OFFICER  
Following us all night.

NELLIE  
You spend so much time on this huge, god-awful ocean, no family. What are you doing out here?

OFFICER  
The English, we're exporting civilization everywhere. I see floggings, slaves, the waste, stupidity. Then I look at the sea. So beautiful and so vast, even men can't foul it up. How can you not love it? Silly, I suppose.

They begin to wander aft.

NELLIE  
What happened with the newlyweds?

OFFICER  
They just got married, it was clear what they were going to be doing in their room. Sailors told them a storm was coming, they couldn't take off their lifejackets at any time. So they never took them off.

NELLIE  
Even when they were doing their...

OFFICER  
Yes. Apparently they were wearing the life jackets and nothing else.

NELLIE

(laughs)

That and her bindings. The girl has her feet bound, Chinese, right? Why do Chinese girls bind their feet?

OFFICER

Why do you western girls bind your chests with corsets? How do you breathe?

NELLIE

You think I had room in my bag for a corset? Not that it's your business, but this figure of mine is the real thing, it's all me, just the way God made me.

He looks out to sea, glances at her in the corner of his eye.

OFFICER

Well, certainly I'm not criticizing his work... So why do you need to get to Hong Kong so desperately?

NELLIE

I need to get home in time. If I fail, I will never return to New York. Better dead than late.

OFFICER

And you think buying a monkey is going to make travelling easier?

NELLIE

I don't always think things through. Goodness, rough seas.

OFFICER

Take my arm?

She smiles and takes his arm.

NELLIE

All my life, men try to take my arm, as though I'll fall over otherwise. I'm a woman, I don't have polio.

OFFICER

Perhaps they just want to hold your arm. That man - he was the one following you?

NELLIE

He wanted to jump overboard, take me with him. Not doing that again.

Sailor returns.

SAILOR

Man overboard, starboard side!

Officer crosses to sailor. Nellie looks over the railing and waves.

NELLIE

Farewell, my friend! Somehow, my heart will go on.

OFFICER

(to the sailor)

Tell the bridge. Stop the propellers.

They begin to run back to the bridge.

NELLIE

Here, let me come along, I learned all about man-overboard drills!

OFFICER

How on earth did you do that?

NELLIE

Well, funny story, really. There I was, on the Hudson River ferry...

They run off.

INT. TAVERN - DAY

Hong Kong. Nellie drinking with British SAILORS and a SECOND OFFICER. She is the only woman in the room. Some sailors play cards.

SAILOR

Come now. America was one of our less profitable colonies. More trouble than it's worth. What do you make? Tobacco and corn, trains and telegraph poles.

NELLIE

So what?

SAILOR

England leads the world in everything in that matters. While you were ripping each other apart in that barbaric war, we were conquering the world.

NELLIE

Conquerors come and go.

SECOND OFFICER

But great rulers leave great things behind. Ever seen a Roman road? Straight as a ruler. Someday, England will lose it all, like the Romans, the Turks. But we leave behind laws, judges, culture.

NELLIE

We already see what you're leaving behind. Spent a week in your colony. Hong Kong, the leper camp. The smell. Went down the Tai Ping Shan -- if I were a man, I could have bought ten slaves for my bed.

SECOND OFFICER

Mark the logbook, boys! Today the Americans gave us a lecture on slavery.

NELLIE

I talked to inmates in prison, crucifixions, death of a thousand cuts, burying criminals up to the neck, the fingernail torture. When a man is executed, they display his head in a jar.

SAILOR

All the other American girls who come here just go...shopping.

NELLIE

Look down the road at our embassy. American flag. Most beautiful flag in the world, and I am ready to whip anyone who says it isn't! Anyone? I'm a hundred twelve pounds naked but I trained with John L. Sullivan.

Not one sailor dares speak.

OFFICER  
You've got a death wish.

NELLIE  
Why do people keep saying that?

SAILOR  
It's good to be proud of your country. America should be proud of you. Someday America will conquer the world, we all see it coming. When you do, what kind of untidy mess will YOU leave behind?

NELLIE  
As the French say, touche. Well, boys, this is my last stop in the Empire, I have sterling I have no more use for. Wheel out a keg of beer, on me. Nothing more depressing than a room full of sober sailors.

Cheers.

NELLIE (CONT'D)  
If I didn't have a busted ankle, I'd dance with every man-jack of you.

OFFICER  
The beer was a nice touch.

NELLIE  
I'm sailing with those boys for a week. Be nice to see friendly face around. I've had more marriage proposals than rape attempts, I'd like to keep it that way. I'm a girl and I'm a long way from home.

INT. SHIPPING OFFICE - DAY

A TELEGRAPH OFFICER helps a sitting SHIPPING OFFICER with a black eye.

SHIPPING OFFICER  
Never thought being a shipping officer could be dangerous.

TELEGRAPH OFFICER  
Here's a bit of salve for your eye.

SHIPPING OFFICER

I told the girl that she was going to be delayed here in Hong Kong for five days. She punched my eye.

TELEGRAPH OFFICER

The ship broke the speed record for the Colombo run, it's not as though the ship was dawdling. You better give me back that medicine.

SHIPPING OFFICER

Give it back?

TELEGRAPH OFFICER

I've got to give her the real news. There's another reporter sailing round the world, Elizabeth Bisland. This other girl made her connection in Hong Kong. Bly didn't.

SHIPPING OFFICER

Miss Bly is going to lose the race.

TELEGRAPH OFFICER

And I get to tell her.

SHIPPING OFFICER

Be brave, my lad.

He passes the medicine.

INT. NEWSPAPER OFFICE - DAY

Cockerill and Jimmy discuss Nellie as they share a flask.

COCKERILL

You think it's going to take her ninety days? What happens when she finds out you bet on her to lose?

JIMMY

Her career is all luck, it's got to run out. She's got a long way to go. She's riding for a fall.

COCKERILL

She's got guts. A lot of men would run away from the fights she gets into.

JIMMY

I know. She loves a good fight.

COCKERILL

Takes a bit of getting used to?

He looks out the window.

COCKERILL (CONT'D)

What did I get that girl into?

EXT. SHIP'S DECK - DAY

San Francisco harbor, a tug boat. Nellie, seasick again, crosses the deck, and is intercepted by the PURSER.

PURSER

Miss Bly -

NELLIE

You really don't want to stand between me and the toilet.

PURSER

Miss Bly, you can't enter San Francisco, you've got to stay aboard the tugboat.

NELLIE

Stay in the harbor? I'm an American citizen! I'm already behind schedule because of the weather! You're the purser, do something!

PURSER

I can't find the health documents. If they don't turn up, we'll be here in the harbor for two weeks --

NELLIE

Two weeks! I will slit my throat with a knife! If I don't get to San Francisco tonight, I WILL. SLIT. MY. THROAT. I promise you. And then I'll slit yours!

PURSER

It doesn't matter. The Central Pacific is blocked by snow in the mountains, worst storm in years.

NELLIE

I could just murder Jules Verne. Eighty days. Why couldn't it be ninety days?

SAILOR

We found the papers! We can go!

NELLIE

(to the sailor)

Get my monkey off the tug and  
onshore, I'll get my bag -

A doctor enters at a distance with documents.

DOCTOR

Miss, we still have a quarantine,  
you've got to come back to the  
ship, I can't let you go onshore  
until I've examined your tongue!

NELLIE

Examine this!

She sticks her tongue out grotesquely, glares at him, and  
runs off. He writes.

DOCTOR

Um, alright...Nelly Bly.

At the other end of the ship, a monkey in a cage, being  
loaded from one ship to another.

EXT. CONSTRUCTION CAMP - DAY

New Mexico. ENGINEER holds up a screw so the workers can see,  
standing beneath a bridge.

ENGINEER

Here she is, boys! The magic screw!  
Sackful of these screws, we stick  
the struts together. Next week we  
put in the real screws, and we're  
finished! Payday, every man-jack!

Cheering.

SECOND ENGINEER

Newspaper man wants to take a  
picture from the top of the bridge.  
Can I take him up on the handcar?

FIRST ENGINEER

Handcar will wreck the bridge. Go  
out there on tiptoe, take it real  
slow.

SECOND ENGINEER

Real slow?

FIRST ENGINEER

Look at these tiny screws. That's all that's holding the bridge up, til we get the big screws. One stiff breeze bring the whole thing down.

EXT. TRAIN ENGINE - DAY

Nellie drives the train; a nervous TRAIN ENGINEER watches her.

NELLIE

Make this thing go faster!

TRAIN ENGINEER

Gimme that thing!

NELLIE

Aw come on, I want to keep driving!

TRAIN ENGINEER

We're up to 75 miles an hour. We're averaging 60 miles an hour all week. That last curve you took, the wheels were coming off the track! And we need to go back a mile.

NELLIE

Why?

TRAIN ENGINEER

To switch tracks. They haven't built the new bridge on this line.

NELLIE

Are you crazy! Lookee up there! There's the bridge, plain as plain!

TRAIN ENGINEER

Here's the map. There ain't no bridge. We go off a cliff and die.

NELLIE

Look! The bridge is right in front of you! We're not backing up! Never tangle with a reporter on a deadline!

EXT. CONSTRUCTION CAMP - DAY

Workers relax on benches, smoking, but not for long.

SECOND ENGINEER

Um, Wilbur. I think I hear a train.

FIRST ENGINEER

That's impossible. Line's closed.  
Til we finish the bridge.

Sound of a TRAIN ENGINE.

FIRST ENGINEER (CONT'D)

Get off the site, the whole bridge  
could come down, train and all!

Second engineer rushes off. Workers flee the bottom of the ravine in terror.

Atop the hill, an engineer waves his hat at the train and then runs off. Train roars across the bridge. Engineer tiptoes onto the bridge, hears the bridge beginning to groan, and runs back to safety. The bridge begins to tilt to one side, and then sag in the middle, accompanied by horrible groaning noises. Screws and then struts pop loose.

THIRD ENGINEER

Don't know who's driving that  
train. Musta made a deal with the  
devil.

EXT. TRAIN ENGINE - DAY

Nellie hangs out the side of the engine, screaming with delight.

A handful of terrified native Americans hastily steer their horses away from the train tracks.

TRAIN ENGINEER

Oh Lord oh Lord oh Lord..

Nellie sees a tiny train platform with a man standing on it.

NELLIE

Crank it open! Make it go faster!

The train blows past the man, and blows the hat off his head. Nellie screams again.

INT. NEWSPAPER OFFICE - NIGHT

Cockerill and Bramble worry about Nellie. They have stopped working and Cockerill is putting a few newspapers away.

COCKERILL

I could just strangle her.

BESSIE

What's wrong?

COCKERILL

Just got back from the telegraph.  
Nellie's disappeared entirely.

BESSIE

How? She's on a train! What'd she  
do, take a short cut?

COCKERILL

This is Nellie, Queen of Chaos.  
She's supposed to be on the train.  
In Missouri. Now nobody can find  
her.

INT. TRAIN CAR - NIGHT

We see the back of a stranger entering Nellie's car. She's in a light robe, smiling, in bed.

NELLIE

Welcome to Missouri. I was waiting  
for you to come.

EXT. NEW JERSEY TRAIN DEPOT - DAY

REPORTERS, POLICEMEN, a LAWYER, and a huge crowd behind them. People watch the scene from rooftops. Cannons boom. Nellie appears in the doorway.

REPORTER

Smile for the camera!

POLICEMAN

Wait! Where's that lawyer with the  
watch? What's the exact time?

Nellie hesitates, irritated, then steps onto the platform.

LAWYER

Three fifty one. Get out your betting slips. 72 days, 6 hours, 11 minutes, 14 seconds.

Cheers and groans.

NELLIE

God, look at you. I travelled around the world to get away from reporters. ...It's all over now.

INT. NEWSPAPER OFFICE - DAY

Nellie on a bench with her bag, with one of the boardinghouse guests she met before the asylum. She's wiped out.

BOARDINGHOUSE GUEST

Don't I know you?

NELLIE

Don't think so. Been travelling. I started in Hoboken, travelled 30,000 miles, ended in Jersey City.

BOARDINGHOUSE GUEST

30,000 miles to get from Hoboken to Jersey City. You take a wrong turn somewhere?

Nellie smiles. She hobbles into Cockerill's office.

INT. NEWSPAPER OFFICE - DAY

Cockerill with Bramble. Nellie falls into his chair, a wreck.

COCKERILL

Nellie! You beat Jules Verne by a week. Your nose is sunburned.

NELLIE

Need sleep. Where's Metcalfe?

Uncomfortable silence.

COCKERILL

That girl Bisland who's making the trip around the world? Still at sea, you beat her like a drum.

NELLIE

I was averaging four hundred miles a day, the whole way.

COCKERILL

You broke the speed record for the Frisco-Chicago run. That bridge you destroyed in New Mexico? Pulitzer had to pay to fix it.

Cockerill waves a telegram and Nellie reads it.

NELLIE

See? I didn't destroy the bridge. I only...bent it.

COCKERILL

You smashed a handcar, ruined an engine, wheel flew off into a ravine. You left more debris strewn across America than anyone since General Sherman. And then that mysterious train ride through Missouri, nobody could find you, we thought you missed the train...

Nellie smiles and gives him a blank look.

EXT. CHINESE MARKET - DAY

Nellie kneels so a Chinese boy can touch her face.

NELLIE (V.O.)

I fell in love - fat wrestlers and geishas in Japan, snake charmers and rickshaw boys in Ceylon, fortune tellers in Hong Kong, the naked Somali divers --

INT. NEWSPAPER OFFICE - DAY

Back to Cockerill's office.

BESSIE

Naked?

NELLIE

Aden, they swim with the sharks.

COCKERILL

Sharks?

NELLIE

Lads wanted to marry me, fat little  
mayors of whistle-stop towns plied  
me with flowers and wine....

She looks out the window and sees billows of smoke emerging  
from a furnace at the ground level.

NELLIE (CONT'D)

Is that smoke? Are we safe?

COCKERILL

We ran a contest - people had to  
clip out a coupon, write down when  
they thought you were coming home.  
Date, hours, minutes, seconds.

NELLIE

It's like a tenement fire, how many  
coupons did they send in?

COCKERILL

Nine hundred thousand. Most famous  
woman in America. Better crowds  
than the president. Thirty three  
men just to read the coupons and  
burn them in the furnace.

NELLIE

What was your guess?

COCKERILL

My bet? No return -- dead at sea.

NELLIE

Sorry to disappoint you....Jackass!  
Betting on me to die.

COCKERILL

I'm kidding. I bet on you to win,  
79 days. You know this is going to  
change everything? You can't do  
undercover jobs anymore.

NELLIE

What are you talking about?

COCKERILL

Doing undercover is like being a  
food critic, nobody can know what  
you look like. Now everybody knows  
you. You saw the shop in the lobby?

NELLIE

Shop?

COCKERILL

Hawkers got your picture, put it on  
Nellie Bly trading cards, dolls,  
dresses, notebooks, schoolbags,  
pens, papers, lamps.

He hands her a Nellie doll.

COCKERILL (CONT'D)

There's a board game, all about  
your race around the world.

NELLIE

Dammit, I'll sue!

COCKERILL

Don't even try. We took over the  
racket downstairs, at least you'll  
make a dollar or two.

Nellie, pensive, looks out the window.

NELLIE

When a girl manages to conquer the  
world and she's only 25, where does  
she go from there? Down.

She leans out the window and drops the doll into the furnace.

INT. TAVERN - NIGHT

Nellie, Cockerill, Bramble celebrate. But Nellie is pensive.

NELLIE

No more undercover? What do I do?

COCKERILL

Part of me is glad - I keep waiting  
for you to get killed. You can do  
exposes, scare the hell out of the  
high and mighty...

She massages her ankle.

COCKERILL (CONT'D)

Something wrong with your foot?

NELLIE

Twisted my ankle in Brindisi -  
almost missed my ship, had to run.

COCKERILL

Italy? You did the last two months  
of all that on a broken ankle??

NELLIE

I didn't break it. I only bent it.

BESSIE

And you only had one dress? Off to  
bed.

She hobbles out.

BESSIE (CONT'D)

You're taking care of her now?

COCKERILL

You don't take care of her, you  
just call the firemen when it's all  
over. My nerves are shot.

BESSIE

There's a song about her. Frankie  
and Johnny. Nellie is supposed to  
be the homewrecker who causes the  
wife to shoot the husband.

Nellie reenters to grab her notebook but they don't notice.

BESSIE (CONT'D)

It's cruel - Frankie is this girl  
in Saint Louis who found out her  
man Johnny was canoodling with  
Nellie Bly, then Frankie shot  
Johnny dead out of jealousy.

COCKERILL

Absolute slander!

BESSIE

Nellie was only in Missouri once,  
during her trip around the world.  
So unless she was making violent  
love to this Johnny while pounding  
down a Missouri railroad track....

(pauses)

You know, I can see Nellie doing  
that. Put that down as "maybe".

NELLIE

Hey!

COCKERILL

What were you doing on that train  
in Missouri? We've been wondering.

NELLIE

Making a deal with the devil.

EXT. STREET - NIGHT

Nellie limps up Broadway, still wearing her dress, carrying  
her bag. Her waiting NEIGHBORS recognize her.

NEIGHBOR

Hey, it's her. Where's Metcalfe?

People from across Broadway rush toward her. She smiles and  
shakes a lot of hands. Soon the crowd is enormous. Squirting  
through the crowd is a little GIRL in a deerstalker hat.

GIRL

Nellie, my Daddy says you're crazy.

NELLIE

He's not the first.

GIRL

Momma reads me your stories. Gonna  
write a big one about your trip?

NELLIE

Sure am.

GIRL

Got my Nellie hat right here.

NELLIE

You look sharp, sweetie.

POLICEMEN push into the growing crowd led by a SERGEANT.

SERGEANT

What's the big show? Got Sullivan  
fighting Gentleman Jim in there?

He finds Nellie at the center of it all.

SERGEANT (CONT'D)

Nellie Bly. And you're alive!

NELLIE

Just barely.

SERGEANT

Governor had a bet on you, cussed a  
blue streak you got here so fast.

She hikes to her home, surrounded by a tiny ring of policemen  
and a larger ring of onlookers. She looks at one of the cops.

NELLIE

You arrested me at that bar fight?

POLICEMAN

Sorry, Missus.

NELLIE

It's Miss.

INT. APARTMENT - NIGHT

Nellie enters her flat, turns on a gas light. She sniffs:  
something went sour during her time away.

She hears the police break up the crowd outside; street noise  
drops gradually to almost nothing.

Nellie gets a fire going in the stove and puts a tea-kettle  
on, leaving the stove door open. She removes her dress,  
groans with delight, changes into a robe. The voice of a man  
named PATTY is heard on the street and she opens the window.

PATTY (O.S.)

Welcome home, Nellie!

NELLIE

Patty. Did you win anything?

PATTY (O.S.)

Missed by a day. You're always in  
such a hurry.

NELLIE

Buy you a pint tomorrow, you can  
show me your little boy.

PATTY (O.S.)

Where's that lad Metcalfe?

NELLIE

An excellent question.

The kettle sings, she pours tea, sets it on a table. She sits  
in the dim light, waiting for it to cool. Alone. She watches,  
fascinated, as the fire inside the stove slowly burns out.

INT. NEWSPAPER OFFICE - DAY

Cockerill is now in his sixties.

COCKERILL

A girl is worshipped when she's young. Then the long, slow slide. It was hard to watch as she lost it all. The world forgot her, moved on. New writers came along, thought Nellie's work was quaint. She lost her money. And then Metcalfe.

INT. TAVERN - DAY

Nellie and Metcalfe fight, ignoring their beers.

NELLIE

Jimmy, let's have that talk.

JIMMY

Is this about the trip again?

NELLIE

I knew when I came back, you'd find a way to turn it all into a joke.

JIMMY

Come on. Can't you see that there's a little bit of the circus in all this?

NELLIE

The circus? A man tried to kill me. Our ship almost went down off China....I thought you just don't like women who got some sand. Then I saw what you did to that boy on the drama desk.

JIMMY

His work was an embarrassment.

NELLIE

He's a young writer. Passionate. A real editor is a teacher. That old crank Erasmus kicked my backside but he made me a good writer.

JIMMY

And?

NELLIE

You made that boy look like a fool.  
The whole city saw it... I was  
wrong. I always believed you could  
be tough, but also be generous.

JIMMY

Generous. Are we back to the money?

NELLIE

Know what? Keep the money. This is  
too much work. Find a normal girl.

She kisses him. Her eyes begin to water.

NELLIE (CONT'D)

I love you, Jimmy... Your  
streetcar's coming.

Metcalf leaves. Bartender looks at the door.

BARTENDER

One beer or two?

Nellie, crying a bit, holds up a finger.

BARTENDER (CONT'D)

Usually I'm listening to men  
talking about their women troubles.  
Got into a fracas with your man?

NELLIE

I don't think I was made for this.

BARTENDER

You worry too much. I still read  
your stories, you know.

NELLIE

There's one or two die hards.

INT. NEWSPAPER OFFICE - NIGHT

Nellie and male reporters play poker. A young southern girl,  
ELIZABETH BISLAND, enters.

NELLIE

Boys, put your suspenders back on,  
there's a girl in the house.

POKER PLAYER

Oh hush. You've seen us in our  
undershirts before --

NELLIE

We have a special guest. You remember my trip around the world?

POKER PLAYER

You're joking. Every night at the bar, it's the same thing. "There I was, on the deck of the Oriental..."

NELLIE

Here's the other gal who made the trip, Lizzie Bisland. She's another world shaker! Get her a beer!

BISLAND

Come now, you beat me fair and square. I will have some wine.

NELLIE

I got here four days faster because I'm that much crazier. Right boys?

POKER PLAYER

You said it, not me.

NELLIE

Phineas Fogg did it in 80, you made 76, so you still beat him. You think the trip wasn't worth it?

BISLAND

(smiles)

I'll never be the same girl again.

NELLIE

Heard you landed yourself a man.

BISLAND

Lawyer. Wedding next year.

NELLIE

(pensive)

Well, you beat me in that race, anyway. You'll keep writing?

BISLAND

I'm using my maiden name.

POKER PLAYER

Hey Nellie, some bourbon?

NELLIE

Hell no, I'm losing over here.

POKER PLAYER

And you lose again. Three queens.

NELLIE

Aw, crap!

POKER PLAYER

Even a woman with your brass isn't gonna take my money with a pair of threes. You're just plain unlucky.

NELLIE

I'm the luckiest girl alive. I even got a professional opinion. Fortune teller in Aden. The Arabian Sea.

POKER PLAYER

Here we go again.

NELLIE

This is a new one. Gypsy lady said I live to be a hundred, long as I didn't use up all of my nine lives.

POKER PLAYER

You're doomed. How many times have you looked death straight in the face? Come on, rack em up.

NELLIE

Let's see. I was ten, father shot at my mother, almost winged me. Felt the bullet go through my hair. California, the train, the engine cracked a wheel, almost derailed.

POKER PLAYER

That's two!

NELLIE

Jumped overboard in the harbor. Does that count? Judges ruling --

POKER PLAYER

In a coat, you should have drowned for sure. That's three!

NELLIE

Mexico, they almost executed me.

POKER PLAYER

Four!

NELLIE

Ship off of China, crazy man tried  
to throw me overboard.

POKER PLAYER

Five!

NELLIE

Central Park, the rapist.

POKER PLAYER

Six!

NELLIE

Almost went down in that monsoon.

POKER PLAYER

Seven!

NELLIE

Wrecked that railroad bridge.

POKER PLAYER

Hey, sweetie, that's eight.

NELLIE

(unnerved)

I'll have that drink now. One life  
left. I blew through eight of them,  
I'm only 25. I should be more  
careful...Naah!

POKER PLAYER

Sun's coming up. Walk you home?

NELLIE

No, I'm alright.

She smiles, gets up, takes Bisland's arm.

NELLIE (CONT'D)

Congratulations. Your lucky lawyer.

INT. TAVERN - DAY

Nellie and Bramble chat on a park bench on a hilltop with  
SUSAN B. ANTHONY. Nellie is now 31.

BESSIE (V.O.)

Nellie said she was gonna work in  
New York, marry a millionaire,  
change the world. I thought she was  
insane.

(MORE)

BESSIE (V.O.) (CONT'D)

But damn if she didn't do all three. She marries this steel manufacturer, must be seventy years old. Man's name is Seaman.

INT. CHURCH - DAY

Nellie and her cranky old groom, SEAMAN, are being photographed in front of a church. Unsmiling.

EXT. STREET - DAY

And then the old man dispatching burly detectives to follow Nellie across town.

BESSIE (V.O.)

But none of it lasted. Never did find true love, not with that old codger. He followed her with detectives, he was sure Nellie was fooling with Metcalfe. He's trying to keep Nellie under his thumb.

INT. TAVERN - DAY

Back to the chat with Ms Anthony, as they walk up a hill.

NELLIE

My readers want to know, whether Susan B Anthony was ever in love?

ANTHONY

Define "love".

NELLIE

Good question.

ANTHONY

I've been in love. A girl marries poor she's a housekeeper, a drudge; if she marries wealth, she's a pet and doll. Had I married at 20, I would have been a drudge or a doll for 55 years. Marrying a man for support is demoralizing... Your next salvo is going to wake em up. Women in the army?

(reads)

"Do you think a company of soldiers led by a woman would ever dare run away?"

(MORE)

ANTHONY (CONT'D)

If the United States goes to war with Spain I will raise a regiment, led by women, and this regiment will go to the front, and you will see war such as there never was before." Better than that last thing you wrote. Stupid.

NELLIE

I needed the money.

ANTHONY

A story about training circus elephants?

NELLIE

Tell you, I had a real hoot. And I scared the circus boys to death. They said I did things with the elephants that even they were afraid to try.

Anthony opens her mouth to ask for details, changes her mind.

ANTHONY

Never mind, I don't want to know...Heard you were almost out of the business.

NELLIE

No one was reading my stories. I hit a hot streak for a while: met Emma Goldman in jail, crooked cops, Pullman strike.

ANTHONY

Your husband sick? Am I the first one to ask you about Metcalfe?

NELLIE

I was the one told Jimmy to marry some old-fashioned girl, make babies. Nobody's fault but mine.

ANTHONY

You're not bothered he got married?

Nellie smiles bravely.

NELLIE

It was my idea. Of course I'm bothered. At least one of us is happy. Going home to that old man is like being in a tomb.

They descend a hill. Nellie stumbles. Anthony takes her arm.

ANTHONY

Careful.

NELLIE

This ankle never healed right.

ANTHONY

A girl's got to be just as graceful  
coming down the hill, as going up.  
...Even if no one's watching.

EXT. COUNTRY ROAD - DAY

We see Nellie, a terrified Cockerill, a young man named  
GILMAN, and a driver rocketing across the countryside in a  
car. Nellie is 40.

NELLIE (V.O.)

Hey, letter from Cockerill, he  
arrived at the beach house.

(reads)

"I enjoyed our ride in your car so  
much, it will last me a while until  
I get a new set of nerves. Our next  
ride will be in my machine, a calm,  
serious Cadillac that drives a sane  
rate of speed and groans all the  
way. In such a vehicle a man might  
reach middle age. Young people like  
you and Gilman may dash around at  
sixty miles an hour, taking the  
bark off trees, but no more for  
this old gentleman. I don't want to  
be mixed up in my death with a  
crazy chauffeur, found with an iron  
axle through my liver. I appreciate  
none the less your kind, courteous  
and persistent effort to kill me  
last Saturday."

Nellie alights from the car and kisses Gilman. Bramble and  
Cockerill observe.

BESSIE

That boy Gilman is so young.

COCKERILL

Tried to warn her. She's letting  
him run the money at her husband's  
factory. Old man's dying.

(MORE)

COCKERILL (CONT'D)

She's hungry for romance. I don't think her luck has gotten any better.

INT. FACTORY - DAY

Bramble talks to the new factory boss - Nellie, now 50. Workers create modest amounts of noise and chaos, and Nellie leads Bessie to a quiet corner. She's exhausted.

BESSIE

How are you doing, really?

NELLIE

Once Robert's funeral was over, it was time to settle his estate, turned into a fight. I love a good fight.

BESSIE

I never would have guessed.

NELLIE

Robert's family fought the will in court, and I crushed them.

BESSIE

Then you had to manage the estate. Who did you hire to run it all?

NELLIE

Are you joking? I'm doing it myself.

BESSIE

Oh boy.

NELLIE

I'm president of the firm. I went to the shop, worked the stuff myself - I have twenty five of my own patents. A new milk can...

She picks up a trash can.

NELLIE (CONT'D)

A garbage can that can be stacked! Got doctors for the families. Had money left for that orphan house.

They cross to a small building; a group of kids plays in front of it. A small Asian boy watches them; Nellie approaches him and he smiles at her.

NELLIE (CONT'D)

Placed four children with parents.  
This one's Japanese. Needs a  
mother. If I were younger.

She hugs the boy.

NELLIE (CONT'D)

I'm leaking money. Robert's family  
is suing, competitors steal my  
designs, employees steal money -  
that man Gillman who was romancing  
me? He was picking my pocket.

BESSIE

Warned you.

NELLIE

I'm just not a girl that can be  
warned. The banks called in their  
loans, I need to find investors who  
aren't part of the New York network  
of fuzzy old men.

She stands.

BESSIE

Where are you going?

NELLIE

Europe. Austria.

BESSIE

You're insane. War is going to  
break out any day. There will be  
chaos and danger and -- ahh --

She figures it out.

BESSIE (CONT'D)

It took me a minute.

NELLIE

Whenever there's a gigantic fire,  
there's a hundred terrified men  
running away from the fire, and --

She raises her hand.

NELLIE (CONT'D)

One crazy girl running toward it.

BESSIE

You're going to cover the war,  
aren't you? No woman's ever done  
it.

NELLIE

I'm getting sued, a trip over there  
might cool things down. Oh, did you  
hear about my train?

BESSIE

Your...what?

NELLIE

Railroad built this train, named it  
the Nellie Bly. Fastest they had.

BESSIE

Had...?

NELLIE

Until it crashed and burst into  
flames, because they had dynamite  
on board.

BESSIE

They named a train the Nellie Bly,  
packed it with dynamite, sent it  
rolling down the track? They should  
have seen that explosion coming.

EXT. AUSTRIAN BATTLE TRENCH - NIGHT

Nellie and some Austrian soldiers fall back from one trench  
to another as shell and shot rain down. It's World War I.

EXT. AUSTRIAN BATTLE TRENCH - NIGHT

We see Nellie in a trench further to the rear, manacled  
again, as an AUSTRIAN OFFICER talks to her and processes  
paperwork on a crate.

AUSTRIAN OFFICER

Fraulein, if you will just admit  
you're a spy for the British we can  
give you a speedy execution.

NELLIE

Colonel -- British? Are you  
listening to my accent??

(MORE)

NELLIE (CONT'D)

Is there a woman in the world who's been in handcuffs more than I have? Pittsburgh, Mexico, India.

An ENGLISHMAN, another prisoner, enters.

ENGLISHMAN

Wilhelm, you're late for our Faro game...Good God, you're Nellie Bly! What in the world are you -

AUSTRIAN OFFICER

Not you too. I'm still not convinced she's Nellie Bly. How could she get all the way to this battle front?

ENGLISHMAN

Nellie got all the way round the world in the time it takes you lot to conquer a mile of territory.

NELLIE

He says I'm a spy. He wants to hang me -

AUSTRIAN OFFICER

Shoot you.

NELLIE

Shoot me. Lot of people shooting at me since I got to the front line. Those trenches - I thought that was my number nine right there.

She gets up painfully.

ENGLISHMAN

You weren't shot in the fighting?

NELLIE

I picked up a poisoned bullet. I have a rash that starts at my waist, goes to my feet, with all the stops in between. When I go to the latrine, you'll hear me yelling a mile out...

ENGLISHMAN

Be careful with your stories. The American army is angry about the pro-German tone of your stories -

NELLIE

I'm organizing aid for German orphans.

ENGLISHMAN

You criticize the British, you praise the Germans, you have no passport or visa -- they may not let you back into New York harbor.

NELLIE

I'll just have to swim for it. Wouldn't be the first time!

ENGLISHMAN

There are people on both sides of the war who want to shoot you for treason. You must be so proud.

She staggers and groans.

NELLIE

So they still remember me, then?

INT. NEWSPAPER OFFICE - DAY

Nellie and Bramble end their workday, putting away papers and shutting drawers.

NELLIE

Metcalfe may stop by. All the detectives following him, trying to catch us with our pants down. Jimmy just can't stand seeing me on the front page again.

BESSIE

You don't know Metcalfe like you think you do. He was never jealous of you.

NELLIE

Of course he was.

BESSIE

He's a drama critic. Biggest danger is that Romeo is gonna bore him to death. He doesn't jump into factory fires and bar fights like you do.

NELLIE

I don't follow.

BESSIE

Jimmy wasn't afraid you'd steal the spotlight. He was afraid one night a cop would knock on his door and tell him you were dead. Attacked in a jail, shot in a slum riot...Every night, he was afraid. We all were.

NELLIE

I know a policeman's wife, she was terrified every time her husband went out on the beat.

BESSIE

Her husband weighs 200 pounds and he has a gun and a baton. You're a little girl with a pencil and a death wish. Metcalfe couldn't take it. He thinks it's his job to keep you safe. You scare everybody.

She retreats as Jimmy enters. He is in his fifties too. Nellie can't help getting watery eyes again.

JIMMY

Came to apologize about the fuss.

NELLIE

It's my fault. My husband was just positive that I still love you.

JIMMY

Was he right?

NELLIE

Course he was. Then he sent those detectives to catch us in the act.

JIMMY

It all came out in court. Hurts your reputation more than mine.

NELLIE

That was Robert's fault. He didn't pay the damn detective before he died - the man had to sue me to get the money for spying on me.

JIMMY

Sorry. Sorry about Robert too, even if he was chasing me all over town.

NELLIE

Just imagine Robert and your wife  
dying at the same time.

JIMMY

Wipe your eyes. You miss me?

NELLIE

I'm crying because I'm sorry! I  
never knew how hard this was for  
you. Never wanted to hurt you.

JIMMY

So it was you that didn't  
understand ME?

NELLIE

I don't cry for myself, I cry for  
other people.

JIMMY

That's why you'll be a reporter til  
they bury you. I wonder if this is  
a chance to fix what got broke.

NELLIE

That's sweet. You tried to change  
me, I tried to change you. I feel  
old. I don't want to wreck your  
life again, just cause I'm getting  
all girly and drippy. Get yourself  
a sweet young actress, your real  
love was always the theater.

JIMMY

That's why I fell for you. You  
really are the greatest show on  
earth.

She laughs, hugs him hard and long.

NELLIE

Oh crap, here I go again.

JIMMY

Anybody can shine when they're  
young, top of the world. You have  
as much grace losing as winning.

NELLIE

John Sullivan said the same thing.  
When a man knocks you out, get up  
and shake his hand. I just feel old  
and tired.

JIMMY

You're especially beautiful when you stop running and hold still.

NELLIE

Then you definitely got the wrong girl.

JIMMY

I heard you went broke. So you're alright? By yourself? Seriously.

NELLIE

(laughs)

Jimmy, think. Cockerill told me to go round the world. He didn't tell me to go alone. I could have taken a bodyguard, a lady's maid. I could have taken you!

JIMMY

I'd have loved to go with you.

NELLIE

I thought about it. I did! I went alone. One girl, one bag, one dress. I'm okay. Been a lone wolf a long time. People ask after me, like I'm dying of a tumor. Ignore the blubbering. Nobody believes me, but I'm really alright!

JIMMY

But there are one or two things you miss.

She wipes her eyes and touches his face.

NELLIE

Yeah. There sure are.

He leaves. She holds up a finger to the bartender.

BARTENDER

Trouble?

NELLIE

Sure is. I got a crooked alderman to catch, and you haven't given me my beer yet. ...I'm fine, Mickey.

(pulls out a book)

I've got a date with Mark Twain.

INT. BEDROOM - DAY

Nellie, 57, blanketed in a chair. Cockerill sits with a paper.

COCKERILL

So you've heard about Wilson, then?

NELLIE

Old Erasmus. A few years younger I would have gone to his funeral. I could be seeing him again soon.

COCKERILL

You're sick as a dog, you're so calm.. You lost the steel firm - they stole everything, lawsuits, tax man. Metcalfe went his own way.

NELLIE

I had money, I lost it. I had fame, it's gone. Metcalfe, Gilman, gone. You waiting for me to cry? I have the only thing I care about. All the times they want me in handcuffs, the times you tried to take me off a story, all the "men only" clubs and locked doors. All the places they said I can't go, I go.

She holds up her wrists.

NELLIE (CONT'D)

Look! No handcuffs!

COCKERILL

So you're free to do...what?

NELLIE

I went round the world, just to end up right where I started. Doing what I love. Writing. And hacking people off. Be honest! Am I still writing? Starting a new holy war every week? Don't I make your blood boil every month? Like you want to throw a rock through a window?

(huge laugh)

All I need in the world, sweetie!

COCKERILL

Best reporter in America, male or female. You were the best.

NELLIE

Go easy with the past tense there.  
If I die tonight, can't say I  
didn't get my money's worth. I feel  
like a five-year-old getting off  
the merry-go-round - wish I could  
do it all over again. No regrets.  
Don't change a damn thing.

COCKERILL

Not even Metcalfe.

She is silent for a moment.

NELLIE

I had no idea I could hurt so bad.  
Nobody warned me. But the sweet  
parts were...sweet. So, not even him.  
I picked my poison. Girl can be  
just as lonely with a man as  
without. Metcalfe was a brute,  
Seaman was a jealous crank, Gilman  
stole my money. All the reporters  
who couldn't stand getting beat by  
me. Men. I tried, John. I did try.

COCKERILL

Well, who opens your jam jars for  
you? Who kills your spiders?

They smile.

NELLIE

But then old Erasmus, and Madden,  
who put up with my wilder days. And  
you, no matter how I tormented you,  
you loved me most of all.

COCKERILL

Go easy with the past tense there.

NELLIE

One regret. Never raised a child.

COCKERILL

Where is that Japanese boy -

NELLIE

Found a family for him.

COCKERILL

You don't regret not taking him?

NELLIE

Course I do. I'm too old. Sweet boy...So when I get better, what's the next story?

COCKERILL

Well. They're searching for the tomb of King Tutankhamen in Egypt.

NELLIE

Oh please --

COCKERILL

No, you can't go...That Mussolini is taking over in Italy. Your friend Gandhi is in jail again.

NELLIE

You got to take off the handcuffs. I can't die of old age. I know you wrote my obituary. "Nellie Bly, dead in a factory riot, earthquake, a train derailment." Something with a little ginger to it.

COCKERILL

Go to sleep, dream of chaos and disaster, villains who need chasing, men who need kissing. And dark, sweet secrets on a Missouri train.

She reminisces; delighted laugh.

NELLIE

A Missouri train...

COCKERILL

Ha! I knew it! I knew it!

NELLIE

Well, you'll keep my dark, sweet secrets for me, won't you?

MONTAGE.

Combination of still and live action depicting Cockerill's speech, or perhaps sketches.

COCKERILL (V.O.)

Nellie never saw Margaret Bourke  
White, who was torpedoed and  
strafed in World War Two, stranded  
in the Arctic, and crashed in a  
helicopter;  
She never saw May Chidiac, a woman  
who kept reporting after assassins  
cost her her arm and her leg;  
Or Farida Nekzad, the writer  
escaped from kidnappers by jumping  
from a speeding car;  
Or Katie Graham, the newspaper lady  
who destroyed a president.  
Nellie had no sons, but her  
daughters circled the world.

INT. BEDROOM - DAY

Nellie is in bed, very ill, reaching with one hand to fiddle  
with a gigantic radio set.

EUNICE (V.O.)

Good evening, this is Eunice  
Randall, the Story Lady, coming to  
you from Station 1XE, brought to  
you by Little Folks Magazine.

Nellie hears the woman's voice and a smile lights her face.

EUNICE (V.O.)

Had an interesting day today, had  
to climb up the tower in the rain,  
had a wire come loose!

NELLIE

Get hit by lightning. Girl's got to  
be careful.

EUNICE (V.O.)

Got a special treat tonight, girl  
name Millie Earhart. Believe it or  
not, this girl can fly an airplane!  
Millie, how long you been flying?

MILLIE (V.O.)

Bout a year now. I'm going to try  
to set the altitude record. Gotta  
fly straight up a couple of miles.

EUNICE (V.O.)

Jeepers. How do you top that one?

MILLIE (V.O.)

I might fly across America, maybe  
fly the Atlantic.

EUNICE (V.O.)

If you can do that, you could fly  
all the way around the world.

MILLIE (V.O.)

Golly, that'd take a couple of  
months.

Nellie's smile widens at that, and then her face freezes,  
permanently, still smiling.

EUNICE (V.O.)

Later we do Morse code practice,  
the police report. Got a letter  
here -- for that boy Buster, says  
women shouldn't be on the radio,  
I'll tell ya, my father said the  
same thing..

INT. TRAIN CAR - DAY

Old Nellie looks out the window and sees a biplane flying.  
She smiles. A man in black enters the car. She embraces him.

NELLIE

Well. Number Nine. The Missouri  
train. You've been chasing me a  
long time. Or was I chasing you?

She follows the man through the train to the engine. An  
engineer appears, and suddenly Nellie is 25 again.

TRAIN ENGINEER

There's no bridge, I tell you!

NELLIE

Make this thing go faster!

The engineer is right. There is no bridge at all. Nellie  
screams with delight: it's 1890 again.

EXT. NEW YORK CEMETERY - DAY

It's May. Elizabeth Bisland, now 61, stands in front of  
Nellie's grave, with a man of 35 and a very fidgety girl of  
10. Yards away is a couple standing at another grave.

BISLAND

Happy birthday, Nellie. It's me,  
Elizabeth Bisland. Some folks I  
wanted you to meet.

The other couple glares at her.

BISLAND (CONT'D)

We have a family plot over here, so  
someday you and me, we'll be  
sleeping in the same place.

GIRL

Nellie got here first. Beat you  
again.

The girl laughs out loud. The other couple glares.

BISLAND

You just don't know how to act.

With great effort the girl adopts a serious face and looks at  
the grave. Then a smile, very like Nellie's old smile,  
spreads across her face. The girl looks up and sees a biplane  
flying.

GIRL

Who's flying that thing? Make it go  
faster!

INT. TRAIN ENGINE - DAY

Young Nellie now has control of the engine and screams for  
joy. The train roars off toward a cliff.

FADE OUT.

THE END.