

INT. OFFICE OF "NEW YORK WORLD" EDITOR JOHN COCKERILL 1887 ,
DAY

NELLIE BLY (24) a petite woman with alert eyes, naturally shabby but dressed in her best for today, sits in a chair in front of his desk. She tries to sit still with her hands folded in her lap but can't help but repeatedly smooth the front of her dress nervously.

JOHN COCKERILL, the editor of the newspaper, a portly middle-aged man with a dissatisfied expression ambles in. He doesn't notice Nellie as he heads straight to the hat rack and starts taking off his coat.

Nellie opens her mouth but decides to let him get settled. He whistles as he takes off his hat, unwraps his scarf, and slowly unbuttons his coat. He is taking an awfully long time and Nellie feels more uncomfortable as each moment passes.

He hangs his coat on the coat rack and finally sees Nellie and starts.

JOHN
Good god Nellie!

NELLIE
Good morning Mr Cockerill!

Nellie stands up and extends her hand. He takes it and shakes it limply, still surprised.

JOHN
Miss Bly. Always a pleasure.

Mr Cockerill sits behind his desk.

MR COCKERILL
So.. How did you get in this time?

Nellie sits down.

NELLIE
I told them I was your niece and I had urgent news about my poor sick mother.

MR COCKERILL
That's a little better than last time when you told them you were from the Secret Service and you wanted to inform me of a conspiracy the public needed to know about.

NELLIE

That was a little farfetched.

MR COCKERILL

Or the time before that when you said you were the escaped captive wife of the Mexican president.

NELLIE

My imagination is waning at present I do admit.

MR COCKERILL

And yet you strain to come up with these stories so you can get into my office and we can have the exact same conversation.

NELLIE

People change their minds sir.

MR COCKERILL

I do not. I told you we simply do not have a place for you here.

NELLIE

Did you happen to look at my articles from the *Pittsburgh Despatch*? I was one of their best and brightest.

MR COCKERILL

And yet you seemed to write solely about fashion , society and gardening. Hardly the subjects newspapers give their best writers.

NELLIE

That was because of my gender sir. They didn't know what to do with me. That's why I went to Mexico. Did you read my piece on the dictatorship?

MR COCKERILL

Is Mexico the only subject you are capable of writing about?

He stands up and makes his way over to the door.

NELLIE

Of course not.

MR COCKERILL
I see no evidence of that.

He opens the door for Nellie.

MR COCKERILL (CONT'D)
So if you could please leave Miss
Bly and I promise the next time you
use trickery to get into my office
I will not be so cordial.

Nellie looks at the open door and then down at her hands.

NELLIE
I can't leave sir.

MR COCKERILL
Why not?

NELLIE
I'm hungry sir.

He looks at her for a painfully long moment.

NELLIE (CONT'D)
I'm staying with my friend, a wife
of a clerk. I haven't been able to
pay her anything for months. She
can't take care of me for much
longer.

He sighs and closes the door.

MR COCKERILL
You know most young woman in your
predicament simply get married, let
their husbands worry about their
finances.

NELLIE
With all due respect sir, what man
would want to marry a woman with a
stubborn temperament such as mine?

Mr Cockerill smiles and sits back down behind the desk.

He stares at her for a beat. Assessing her and contemplating.

MR COCKERILL
Have you heard of Blackwell's
Island?

NELLIE
No sir.

MR COCKERILL

It's the home of a rather infamous insane asylum for women. We've heard talk that the staff mistreat the patients. Sadly those patients in question are unable to give fair and trustworthy testimony of their abuse.

NELLIE

I see.

MR COCKERILL

So the only way we can be sure of these reports is if someone we know to be sane witnesses and reports on such misconduct.

NELLIE

I don't quite see what...

MR COCKERILL

How good of an actress are you Nellie?

NELLIE

Fairly good sir.

MR COCKERILL

Do you think you could act as a woman who was unsound of mind?

NELLIE

You mean pretend to be mad? To what end?

MR COCKERILL

For the story of course! Don't you see? Becoming a patient is the only way to get to the truth of the matter. I've had the vision of the headline in my mind for months "Ten days in a madhouse" the papers would fly off the rack.

NELLIE

So why hasn't it been done?

MR COCKERILL

A combination of problems; the asylum in question is a women's institution and I have a lack of reporters of the fairer sex, plus the ones I do have are less than enthusiastic about the idea.

NELLIE

You mean they're not as desperate as me.

MR COCKERILL

Are you denying it?

Nellie sighs.

NELLIE

No.

(beat)

I've heard that women who enter such places never come out.

MR COCKERILL

They rarely do. Though none have a editor at an prestigious newspaper to write a letter for them.

(beat)

Ten days. That's all. I will ensure you will be released after that.

NELLIE

I have heard that some of the women they put in there have slightly... violent tendencies.

MR COCKERILL

That's true but you will be surrounded by doctors who I'm sure will protect you.

NELLIE

I don't think I can...

MR COCKERILL

Miss Bly. I know it seems frightening but the newspaper industry is changing. It is no longer enough to sit on the sidelines and write about what you see. It is now a reporter's role to experience and witness horror so others do not have to.

(MORE)

MR COCKERILL (CONT'D)

(beat)

Will you accept the assignment?

Nellie pauses for a long time.

NELLIE

Yes I will.

He rises from his desk and shakes Nellie's hand. Nellie returns it apprehensively. He leads her towards the door.

MR COCKERILL

Excellent! You will not regret this Miss Bly! I promise you it will not be as scary as you think. Plus what harm can a group of women do? Just ask your clerk's wife to notify me as soon as you have entered and I shall count down the days until I can release you.

He hustles her out the door.

NELLIE

Goodbye Mr Cockerill.

MR COCKERILL

Goodbye Miss Bly!

He closes the door.

MR COCKERILL (CONT'D)

Such a fool. Thinking she can get into Blackwells.

He sits at his desk.

MR COCKERILL (CONT'D)

Hopefully that will be the last I have to see of her.

2 INT. WASHING ROOM, DAY

2

Nellie enters to find ELIZA (26) more tough than Nellie but with the same alert eyes. She is washing sheets.

Nellie speaks a little more common now she is with her friend.

ELIZA

Oh Nellie thank god.

She bundles some sheets into Nellie's arms.

ELIZA (CONT'D)

Hang those up would you?

NELLIE

Thought you did the washing that came in this week?

ELIZA

That's ours. Edward threw up on his sheets again.

NELLIE

Ah poor thing.

ELIZA

Boy does it just to test me I'm sure. He's like his father. My mother told me not to marry a sickly man since I'll end up with sickly children. I should have married Mr. Matthews, man was a bore but never saw him with as much as a sniffle.

NELLIE

John is a fine husband.

ELIZA

You can have him then.

(beat)

How was your day?

NELLIE

Quite good actually.

ELIZA

Why's that?

NELLIE

I got a job.

Eliza stops washing.

ELIZA

A writing job?

Nellie nods and Eliza shrieks with joy. She drops her washing and rushes over to give Nellie a hug.

ELIZA (CONT'D)

Oh Nellie. I'm so proud! It's been months and months of you wandering around offices and hearing no and, well I won't prattle, what's the job?

NELLIE

It's investigative reporting.

ELIZA

What's that?

NELLIE

It's where you pretend to be someone else and then report on what you see. People act differently when they know journalists are around.

ELIZA

Where will you be pretending then?

NELLIE

Have the heard of the institution on Blackwells Island?

Eliza takes a step back.

ELIZA

Not the madhouse?

NELLIE

The mental asylum yes.

ELIZA

What will you be doing there?

NELLIE

I'll be a patient.

ELIZA

Nellie you can't! Around all those awful women. People who aren't safe to be around society.

NELLIE

It's simply a home for women who are mentally unsound.

ELIZA

The stories I've heard...

NELLIE

That's simply washerwoman's gossip.

ELIZA

Just because it came out the mouth of a washerwoman doesn't make it untrue. I heard that there are women there who scream through the night, who murder their own children, who...

(whispers)

Engage in intimate activity with their own kind.

NELLIE

(voice dripping with sarcasm)

How shocking.

ELIZA

Nellie I'm serious. It's no place for a woman such as yourself.

NELLIE

I know but Mr Cockerill said he would make sure of my release.

ELIZA

Who?

NELLIE

The editor of *The New York World*.

ELIZA

And you're the type of woman who takes a man on his word?

NELLIE

Not normally but I need this job.

ELIZA

No you don't! I'll take care of you and John's brother is very fond of you...

NELLIE

(sarcastically)

Oh is he now?

ELIZA

William is a good man.

NELLIE

So I'm just supposed to marry William? And that'll be it? That'll be my life?

ELIZA

And what's wrong with that life?

NELLIE

Nothing! But it's simply not me! And these women... They are being mistreated and it is my duty to report on their abuse.

ELIZA

Since when have you been so invested in the plight of the mad?

NELLIE

Since now.
(Beat)
It'll be an adventure.

ELIZA

You and your adventures.

NELLIE

It'll only be for ten days.

ELIZA

It better be. You're not leaving me with nothing but two sickly men for company.

NELLIE

I would not do a thing as cruel as that, but I cannot rely on your kindness forever.

ELIZA

Ten days?

NELLIE

Ten days.

ELIZA

I suppose that will be fine. I'm not trusting that Mr Cockerill to make the journey to release you. I will drag him down myself.