

One

Dearest Mary,

I'm an old woman now. Exactly how old depends on which of the many stories I've told over the years you choose to believe, for I have not always been the most reliable witness to the events of my own life.

I was born in Boston on Christmas Day of 1876. Or perhaps Boston in 1873. Or maybe it was Pennsylvania that same year. Or Poland in 1871. Or Russia in 1869. The official records of my life—the various birth certificates of my children (your mother, aunts, and uncle), my marriage registration, census records, and the like—could be used to prove any of these. But I will tell you this: my parents, your great-grandparents, came to this country from a village near Riga, Latvia, then part of the Russian Empire, in 1875, and I came with them. I was five years old.

When I was a young woman, I did some wild things and they had disturbing consequences for our family, but we'll come to that. I had four siblings, including a twin brother Jacob, but he was born

five years after me. Jake, as we called him, died on Boston Common on May 12, 1894, after an argument with our father Levi. He flew out of the house, got drunk, fell asleep, and froze to death . . . in mid-May. But my father died in 1887, seven years earlier, as did my mother, just two months after my father. Be patient. I will explain.

When you were a little girl I told you bedtime stories about a bicycle trip I made as a young woman, and, as children do, you had a million questions and always wanted to know more. Rooted in a real experience, those stories became more and more outlandish as we added new adventures and new characters over the years. We traveled together in our imaginations to far-off, mysterious lands and met all kinds of colorful and sometimes dangerous characters. We created a world known to just the two of us, and what fun we had in that private world! As you became a teenager, story time became more of a conversation between two women, one grown old and another on the cusp of adulthood. With less imagination and more memory, you learned over the years the outline of the journey I had made as a young woman, but I left much unsaid that I want to say to you now. But some of what I am about to tell you would be hard for a young girl of sixteen to understand, which is why I hope your mother, to whom I plan to deliver this for safekeeping, has honored my request that it not be given to you until your thirtieth birthday or, if she doesn't live to that day, that you have honored my request that it not be opened until then.



When my parents died in early 1887, it fell to my older brother, your great-uncle Bennett, then twenty-one, and me, barely seventeen, to care for our younger brother Jake, age ten, and our baby sister Rosa, who was just eight years of age. The eldest sibling, my sister Sarah,

had married and moved to Maine. Jacob was not my twin, and he obviously didn't freeze to death in the month of May after fighting with our father, but it was a story I told often, even to you, to test the credulity of people. I'm sorry you never met your great-uncle Jacob; he had an innate gentleness about him.

The next year, 1888, almost a year to the day after my mother passed away, I married your grandfather, Simon "Max" Kopchovsky, a simple peddler, who, at twenty-six years of age, was several years my senior. I was still a young woman, just in my late teens, but it was not uncommon for girls to marry at that age back then. My parents arranged the marriage, my father having met Grandpa at shul.

Our first child, Bertha Malkie, was born in December of that year. We called her Mollie, but we never told you about her, and unless your mother has shared the secret, her existence will be news to you when you read this. She died when she was just twenty-three. Well, she was dead to me anyway.

Your aunt Libbie, our second child, was born in March 1891. And your uncle Simon, named for his father, unusual in a Jewish family, was born in May 1892. Barely out of my teens, I had three children of my own to take care of, and my younger brother and younger sister, too. Your mother Frieda, born in 1897, was our youngest.

In the early 1890s, we were living in a tiny third-floor apartment in one of the tenements that lined Spring Street in Boston's West End. The West End in those days was a community of many tongues: Hebrew, German, Polish, Italian, Yiddish, Portuguese, and several others. It was a veritable Tower of Babel. There were even many Negro families in the neighborhood, and Irish, too.

Running errands, if the weather was warm and the tenement windows thrown open to catch the sea breeze, I could smell the pasta sauces, the boiled cabbage and the corned beef, the chicken broth and the pierogis. In every apartment were people who had come to

America from all corners of the world, and who crowded into its cities and slums with their undiminished optimism about life in America.

About a third of Boston's Jews lived in the neighborhood; most, like Grandpa, were devout and Orthodox. Grandpa spent most of his life in shul, while I tended to the children as most Jewish mothers did. We Jews prized family and education above all, and it was expected that I, as a Jewish mother, would attend to nothing else.

But it wasn't enough for me. I wasn't put on the earth to spend my life cooking and cleaning and changing diapers. It seemed like every year I had another baby under my apron. Life was full of drudgery.

The sounds and smells of the neighborhood tempted me. There was a big, wide world beyond the banks of the Charles River, and I wanted to see it and smell it and taste it.



One day, about a week after Valentine's Day 1894, I'd been shopping for Shabbat dinner—a brisket of beef, some potatoes, and, a miracle for February, even a sad-looking cabbage. The streets were icy, and the wind stiff off the ocean. A perfectly miserable day in what was always a perfectly miserable month in Boston. Just as I approached the front door of our building I slipped on the icy cobblestones, and the groceries went skidding halfway across the street. I wasn't hurt—well, maybe my pride a little—and I gathered the groceries, whisked myself inside, and sat on the first-floor landing to collect myself. I was exhausted, physically and emotionally.

Unlike almost every other woman I knew, I had a job, part-time, outside the house. It was scandalous in a small way, and though no one had the nerve to say it to my face, all our Jewish neighbors thought my working was a dereliction of duty and inappropriate. You'd have thought I was running a charnel house out of our

apartment. But three days a week, for eight hours a day, I went door-to-door to businesses in downtown Boston selling advertising space in several of the Boston newspapers. My brother Bennett was a newspaperman, and though he was dubious about it, I pressured him into helping me get the job. Truth be told, we needed the money. Grandpa had a little cart from which he peddled sundries, but really his full-time job was prayer. If nothing changed, the life that lay ahead would be spent in housework and borderline poverty. And things were hard in 1894. President Cleveland was presiding over what came to be called the Panic of 1893, an economic depression that would last until 1897. Grandpa wasn't much of a breadwinner, and I wanted to work. I liked to work. But it was also a necessity. Still, I believed I was destined for bigger and better things.

By the way, early in his first term as president, in the late 1880s, Cleveland's sister, Rose Elizabeth, served as unofficial First Lady of the United States, for the president was then a bachelor. There were whispers even then that Miss Cleveland, who went by "Libby," preferred the intimate company of women. The chatter intensified when she was seen regularly with a Massachusetts woman, Evangeline Simpson. (When Evangeline died in 1930, she requested to be buried in Italy next to Libby.) It all had a whiff of scandal about it, but ever since I was a young girl of about fifteen, I admired Libby. I would read about her performing her duties as First Lady in the newspapers. Over the years, when rumors about her sexuality would surface, I took a quiet satisfaction in it. Why shouldn't a woman be free to love another woman? In my experience, men are no bargain. It's not a coincidence that I named my second daughter, born in 1891, Libbie, though we spelled it a little differently.

As I sat on the first-floor landing on that frigid February day, the question rattling around inside me, though it was not yet fully formed

and I could not have stated it with the clarity I am able to now, was whether my life's story as a woman already had been largely written for me. Was it already written, too, for the two young girls to whom I was now struggling to be a mother? Could a woman step from the line? Could she control her own life and body? Could she dance while others sat up straight and proper? This is why women like Nellie Bly, Susan B. Anthony, and Annie Oakley were so fascinating to me and millions of women of the time. They got us thinking about what was possible. I was particularly taken with Nellie Bly, and as I sat there in the cold hallway of the apartment building, my mind landed, as it so often did, on a story I had followed as a young woman with bated breath as it unfolded regularly in the pages of the *New York World* newspaper.

The *World* was the most sensational and widely read newspaper of the day, copies of which would usually arrive in Boston a day late. The *World* reported the serious news, but there were also stories of the bizarre rituals of African tribes, two-headed children, miracle cures, and other curiosities. Those sections of the paper were like the freak show at the circus. And were they ever *delicious*!

The *World* was the crown jewel in the newspaper empire of the great Joseph Pulitzer, and they were the first to have a celebrity woman writer, a woman of considerable gumption and daring who would go to great lengths for a story. Once, she even had herself committed to a mental hospital so she could write about it from the inside. That was Nellie Bly—at least that's what she called herself. She was born was Elizabeth Cochran.

When I was in my late teens, in 1889, Bly undertook the most amazing stunt of her career, and it made her very, very famous. She set out to travel all the way around the world and get back to where she started, Jersey City, in fewer than eighty days. Some years before, the author Jules Verne had published a series of articles that

would become his famous book *Around the World in Eighty Days*, in which a man named Phileas Fogg sets out, on a bet, to prove that a traveler could, by ordinary conveyance, circumnavigate the globe in eighty days.

Well, Nellie Bly's brainstorm was that she could make a faster circuit of the earth than the venerable Mr. Fogg and that the attempt could be a lucrative publicity stunt for Mr. Pulitzer, who would fund the mission and publish her accounts in serial form in his newspaper. And so it was that I, like nearly every other American who could read, followed her adventures with barely contained excitement, wishing desperately that I, then of tender years, could be like her. After all, since arriving in Boston as a little girl, I had rarely been beyond the city limits.

Bly's around-the-world trip made her an international star. When she had finished her record journey, not only did she publish a book about it, but McLoughlin Brothers turned her adventure into a popular board game, Round the World with Nellie Bly, a game that became one of my most prized possessions.

With my groceries still in my lap, I was abruptly jolted back to the present when the letter carrier came in the front door to leave the day's mail. The children were upstairs, in the apartment below ours, being watched by my sister-in-law Baila, Bennett's wife, who had two small children of her own. She often watched your little aunts and uncle when I was at work or at the markets, and Jake and Rosa were at school or attending to their studies. Thank God.

Anyway, I collected myself and trudged up another flight of stairs to gather the children, and then another to begin getting dinner ready. I was most unhappy with my life, and a wave of melancholy washed over me. Such moods were becoming increasingly common and unnervingly severe, and there were times when I feared they

might overwhelm me completely, that I might drown under their weight. There were even times when I felt such drowning would be a welcome relief. My friend Susie, to whom I will introduce you shortly, was my only escape and all that stood between me and a fall into the darkness.



Unbeknownst to me, at around the same time I was enduring yet another day of domestic “bliss,” a group of men, distinguished gentlemen of wealth and industry, were gathered around a large fireplace inside the Algonquin Club on Commonwealth Avenue in the city’s Back Bay neighborhood. No Jews allowed, of course. All the city’s movers and shakers belonged to the exclusive, cigar-smoke-filled club, which occupied a large brownstone building appointed with thick leather chairs, dark mahogany walls, and butlers who would glide silently about the place catering to the whims of the members.

Colonel Albert Pope was one of the club’s best-known members. Pope had been a manufacturer of sewing and other small machines but in more recent years had turned his sights to a vastly more lucrative market: bicycles.

The bicycle craze had started in Europe, mainly in France and England, and spread to the States. But it caught on in a big way with the invention in the 1880s of the “safety” bicycle. Unlike its predecessor, known as the “penny-farthing” in Britain and the “ordinary” in the States, the safety had wheels of identical size and a chain drive that made the bicycle much safer and easier to ride than those machines with the huge front wheel and the tiny back wheel, a contraption so awkward it was difficult just to mount, let alone ride without killing yourself. There were few women athletes

in those days, and a handful of them raced those ungainly machines, but as a recreational tool, the bicycle, for many reasons, was off-limits to women. It was considered unladylike for a woman to be seen in public exerting herself on a bicycle or, God forbid, exposing her ankles in the process. The moralists, often backed up by the testimony of medical men, argued that riding a bicycle, which brought a woman's private parts—oh, let's call them what they are, you're a grown woman now—genitals in contact with the saddle, would be sexually stimulating to women, and lead to all kinds of moral decay. It may be hard to believe today, in 1947, but some clever fellow even invented what they called a "hygienic" saddle with a space cut out so a woman's genitals would hover above open space rather than touch the saddle. You'd have thought that women on bicycles was the end of femininity and a harbinger of the decline of Western civilization itself! Such folly.

For the most part, women didn't listen, and they were purchasing bicycles in droves. And before you knew it, the bicycle had become a symbol of women's emancipation. In 1895, Frances Willard, who founded the largest women's organization in history, the Woman's Christian Temperance Union, learned, at the advanced age of fifty-three, to ride a bicycle, and she wrote a little book about it in which she explained why, amid the boom in bicycling among men and women, she took up riding: "I wanted to help women to a wider world from pure natural love of adventure—a love long hampered and impeded, and from a love of acquiring this new implement of power and literally putting it underfoot." I like to think I inspired Willard to make that statement, but, again, I'm getting ahead of myself.

I loved that little book, and it's been in the top drawer of my dresser for years. I must have read it a hundred times, and I told your mother that when I die I want you to have it. That little book meant so much to me. When you finish reading this I think you will know why.

At that gathering inside the Algonquin Club, the conversation turned to one of the great debates of the day: the status of women. For years, women had been organizing around the right to vote and were trying to assert themselves in new ways in society. Long under the domination of men, women were yearning for greater autonomy and to be treated as equals. The press even coined a new term for these women: a woman who pushed the boundaries was deemed “a New Woman” or, collectively, “*the* New Woman.”

In his zeal for profits, Colonel Pope was extensively marketing his “wheels,” as they were often called back then, to women. Though he may not have realized it, he was helping to undermine the very social order so prized by his fellow clubmen. While many of these men saw the push for women’s equality as an amusement, and a trifling one at that, underneath their smugness and contempt lurked a real fear that the world as they knew it might well be thrown off-kilter if this women’s movement got out of hand.

As I later learned, someone in the gaggle of men chatting with Colonel Pope remarked on the journey of one Thomas Stevens, who left San Francisco on a high-wheel in 1884 and arrived back almost three years later to claim the distinction of being the first person to go around the globe on a bicycle.

“Surely no woman could match such a feat!” someone declared, and the issue was joined. As the debate raged, Colonel Pope immediately saw the possibilities. The entire argument over the rights of women, over women’s equality—and it was a debate that was sweeping the nation—could be used to sell countless bicycles to women eager to claim their independence.

Pope was a quick thinker. He listened quietly as the men, engulfed in a cigar-smoke fog, appeared to come to a consensus that no woman could do what Stevens had done. Pope cleared his throat, and all eyes turned to him, for he was the biggest fish in this stuffy little pond.

“Is there one among you brave and opinionated souls willing to put your money where your mouth is?” he asked. Nervous glances were exchanged. “I will wager twenty thousand dollars to ten that it can be done, and I will find the woman to do it!” declared Pope.

Now, you may be wondering how I know all this since I obviously wasn’t there. It was recounted to me weeks later by someone close to Colonel Pope, a man who worked in his bicycle store on Washington Street.

After a moment’s silence, John Dowe, his fortune made in the sugar trade, raised a hand. “I’ll take that wager, Colonel.” And with that, one of the butlers was dispatched to bring pen and paper. For the next hour the terms of the wager were argued over and agreed to. Pope could select any woman he wanted for the task, and she would be obliged to meet several conditions in order for the colonel to claim victory. First, she would begin her journey penniless, earn her way around the world, and send home no less than five thousand dollars above her expenses, an enormous sum in those days and a considerable one even today. She was not to accept anything of value without performing some task in exchange. Not just a mere test of a woman’s physical strength and endurance, this would be a test of a woman’s resourcefulness and her ability to fend for herself in the world. Second, the trip had to be completed within fifteen months. This was a clever suggestion by Pope. It added yet another dramatic twist to what would already be quite a bit of theater: a race against time, as it were, just as Phileas Fogg’s and Nellie Bly’s adventures were paced against the clock. Third, to prove she had been around the world, the woman would collect the signatures of American consuls in various cities identified in advance. Finally, she would be required to ride at least ten thousand miles and would receive prize money, a breathtaking ten thousand dollars, put up by Colonel Pope, if she succeeded. One newspaper called it “one of the most novel wagers

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ever made.” Indeed, the wager would be irresistibly alluring to the papers, always on the lookout for stories that could grab a reader’s attention and hold it.

Dr. Albert Reeder, a local physician and an Algonquin member trusted by both Dowe and Pope, agreed to hold the money wagered in escrow until the outcome was determined. All that was left to do was to find the woman bold enough, maybe even just crazy enough to accept the challenge.