

The Bathroom Conversation with Nellie McClung

I slam the stall door shut. *Stupid public bathrooms – never any oiled hinges.*

I turn and immediately jerk away. *Whoa!* A woman stands two inches away from my face, dark eyes sparkling curiously.

“Sorry,” she says gently. “I guess you could say I’m new here.”

She has a poufy bun that looks like my grandmother might have worn, back when she still had hair, and looks uncomfortable in her ill-fitting clothes. Her face is softly rounded. I look at her eyes. They really do sparkle.

Something about her sparks a flare in my head. “You’re that historic woman!”

A decade ago, after the government snatched up the time machine rights, Canada started funding expeditions to bring historically important Canadians back every five years or so to get some insight on how to deal with current problems. They put trackers on them, got security guards and tour guides and everything. They did that with two men and it was successful.

They were bringing a woman this time. A teacher spoke about it in class, but I really couldn’t care less. These people lived a long time ago. How important could they really be?

The woman smiles uncertainly. “I’m Nellie McClung.”

I have more important things to do, but it seems only polite to introduce myself. “I’m –”

She conspiratorially raises a finger to her lips. “Shush! I came here to escape my guards. I’m under orders not to speak with anyone for safety reasons. You won’t get in trouble if I don’t know your name.”

I smile. She doesn’t seem like the stuffy bore I expected. “Why are you hiding?”

“I need some space. It isn’t every day I get whisked into the future.” She slumps against the walls, wrinkles lining her face. “The years are getting to me, I think.”

“You don’t look old.” I say curiously. She sighs.

“Dear, I’m 66.” She doesn’t notice my jaw dropping. “Look at me, blithering on! A lady shouldn’t reveal her age.” She laughs bitterly. “It’s alright for a man to be old, not a woman.”

In spite of myself, my interest grows. “Didn’t you work to improve women’s lives?”

She smiles sadly. “Shame it’s been so long and those problems still exist.” Then Nellie McClung sits on the sticky bathroom floor, overwhelmed.

I wish historic figures would just stay put in history... but something electric’s buzzing in the air. I sit. “Tell me more about you,” I say. She does.

“I was nobody special,” Ms McClung begins. “Born in Chatsworth, Ontario. We gathered for a picnic, once. I wanted to race the other girls... but they said girls shouldn’t race. Skirts would fly –legs would show! No one explained why that was bad.”

Indignation on behalf of her childhood-self sweeps over me.

“That was the start. Everywhere I looked, women were pushed down to make pretty staircases for men. I felt so helpless! How do you fight when no one cares? I found out that the ones who cared just didn’t speak up. Other women had seen the suffering of women caused by overwork and neglect. In... 1912, after getting married and giving birth, I formed the Political Equality League with Manitoban women, hoping to improve female worker conditions.”

“Did it work?” I ask.

Ms McClung taps her cheek, looking faraway. “Yes... no. The man in charge was Premier Roblin.” She snorts. “He acknowledged the problem, but disagreed that female suffrage was the solution. Boar.”

She turns pink. I snicker; she didn’t mean to say “boar” aloud, but I’m glad she did. “What did you do?”

“We held a *marvelous* mock parliament.” Her grin reaches from ear to ear. “I’ve never had so much fun! We had the idea of turning the tables on the men, letting *them* see what it’s like. We pretended to decide whether or not *men* should be allowed to vote. I played the role of Premier Roblin.”

She jumps up and pantomimes being the premier, strutting with quick steps and thrusting out her chest, making sweeping gestures. “Man is made for something higher than voting. Politics unsettles men, meaning unsettled bills, broken vows, and... *divorce!*”

I laugh delightedly, imagining the look on Roblin's face. "How'd it go?"

"It was a smashing success! So much energy and support was thrown behind the League." She smiles proudly.

"Afterwards, I moved to Edmonton and was elected to the Alberta legislative assembly, as a Liberal member of opposition. During my stay in Edmonton, I also worked on the "Persons Case" with four other women." Seeing my incomprehension, she explains.

"Until 1929, Senate seats in Canada were open only to "eligible persons" according to Constitution, and the Supreme Court ruled that women weren't "persons"." She is all flaming cheeks and clenched fists now.

That is so completely wrong. I make a strangled noise of outrage. "What did they think we *were*?"

Seeing me upset makes her feel vindicated, and her fists unclench. "Bother if I know. Everyone is frightened by what is unconventional, even when the conventions are the ones defying logic."

She lets slip a smile. "We did it, however. We succeeded in changing the views of the Court."

I'm thinking they shouldn't have had to change views in the first place, but I congratulate her anyways.

She bows. "Last year, I was the only female member of the Canadian delegation to the League of Nations, in Geneva." She sighs, reminiscing.

There's a short silence. She glances at the door. "I had better go. The guards aren't that stupid. If they know I spoke with you, you will be subject to much attention."

Feeling like something special just happened, I reach to shake her hand. She grasps both and says, "Remember, never underestimate the power of a woman."

I nod as Nellie McClung, eyes sparkling, leaves.

I remember a school presentation about young girls who can't go to school. Canadian women can vote now, but I don't know if all other women in the world can, or do. Nellie

McClung fought for Canadian women's suffrage, got women to be recognized as people in Canada, got women to be allowed seats in the Senate, and improved female factory workers' conditions in Montreal. If she can become a champion, what's stopping me?

Shame it's been so many years and those problems still exist, she said. I think about a talk about an organization that was started by students, for students, for countries where children – especially girls – were deprived of education because their basic needs were lacking. I ignored it at the time...

I get up, smiling slightly. It's not fair that only some kids have to struggle through boring history lessons. That burden should be on *all* children.

I'll start small, volunteering, doing community work. You never know who needs to borrow a strong voice...

I'll use that voice for those who don't have a voice right now. Like Ms McClung, I'll lend a voice to the mute. Like her, I'll lend my strength to weak. Like Nellie McClung, I want to become a champion of a worthy cause.

After a slight pause, I stride out of the bathroom into the bright sunlight.

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