

MODERN GIRL PHILOSOPHER:
THE STORY OF VELVA G. DARLING

by

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A THESIS

Presented to the Department of Cinema Studies
and the Robert D. Clark Honors College
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Bachelor of Arts

Fall 2017

An Abstract of the Thesis of

Cosette LeMay for the degree of Bachelor of Arts
in the Department of Cinema Studies to be taken October 2017

Title: Modern Girl Philosopher: The Story of Velva G. Darling

Approved: _____

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This creative project explores the process of adapting history into a screenplay. The project centers on the life and career of Velva G. Darling, a female columnist active in the 1920s and '30s. Darling achieved success writing a nationally syndicated pro and con column and was eventually dubbed both the “modern girl philosopher” and “the female Francis Bacon.” By 1933, she had disappeared from the public eye, and her name appeared in print for the last time in 1940. This project seeks to investigate the construction and performance of Velva’s writer persona, tracing the concept of “self-branding” from the past to the present. Included is the screenplay, “DARLING” as well as an analytical component that explores both the research and writing process, the screenplay’s thematic elements, and the project’s significance.

Acknowledgements

I would like to sincerely thank Professor Daniel Steinhart, Masami Kawai, and Professor Casey Shoop for guiding me through the long and often confusing process of developing this creative thesis. Their knowledge, patience, and unending faith in the project were a constant source of encouragement. They allowed me the space to make mistakes, prompted me to think critically about my own writing, and pushed me to develop this thesis far beyond what I imagined it could be. I would also like to thank Professor Louise Bishop for being pure magic. I am forever grateful to both Mariah Denman and Alec Malnati for their infinite capacity to brainstorm, proofread, and cheerlead. Finally, I want to thank my parents for the unconditional support and love at the foundation of all of my achievements.

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Introduction

Origins of the Project

The concept for this project first came about in 2014, when I began to think seriously about what I hoped to accomplish with my thesis. I knew that I wanted to write a screenplay engaging with ideas of femininity and performance and had explored a few different possibilities, but I did not truly find my story until I stumbled across Andrew Heisel's 2016 article for *Jezebel* "Forever 23: The Rapid Rise and Sudden Disappearance of Velva Darling, Modern Girl Philosopher."¹ Heisel laid out Velva's meteoric rise and subsequent decline working as a newspaper columnist and media figure in a fascinating and well-researched story. Her story raised many questions: How had she achieved so much in such a male dominated industry and era? If she had been so successful, why had I never heard her name before? What caused her to disappear just as suddenly as she had arrived? I set out to learn as much as I could about Velva's life and accomplishments.

Velva Darling was born in 1901 to parents Belle and Seymour Darling. Her younger brother was born in 1905, and by 1910 the family had relocated from their home in Minnesota to San Luis Obispo, California. Velva's father achieved success as the owner of Darling's Department Store, and the family appears to have lived a comfortable lifestyle. Velva attended Stanford at a time when female enrollment was limited to just 500. She initially chose to major in Law, but switched to English after

¹ Andrew Heisel. "Forever 23: The Rapid Rise and Sudden Disappearance of Velva Darling, Modern Girl Philosopher." Pictorial, Gizmodo Media Group, 14 Sept. 2016

she was caught writing papers for fellow students.² On October 8, 1924, Velva became the school's first female columnist when she launched "The Law Steps" on the front page of *The Daily Palo Alto*.³

Velva's writing career continued to flourish after graduation. She covered the 1925 Santa Barbara earthquake, "getting a scoop on the disaster by commandeering the first long distance telephone wire put up after the catastrophe."⁴ From there, Velva was offered a place at William Randolph Hearst's *Los Angeles Examiner* where she began writing regular features.⁵ In 1926, she introduced "Sometimes I Think Yes, But Sometimes I Think No," a pro and con column that would become her signature work.⁶ By 1927, she had signed a \$100 per week contract and her writing was being nationally syndicated.⁷ By 1931, she had penned a screenplay and flew cross-country with aviator Charles Lindbergh. She had received a book contract, a recording contract, a contract for a radio show and a vaudeville act.⁸ By 1933, Velva G. Darling had disappeared from the public eye, and her name appeared in print for the last time in 1940.⁹

Her story prompted me to consider difficult questions of image, control, and commodification. It seemed clear that Velva's success was predicated on her public persona as a flapper; she was most often billed as an "modern girl philosopher,"¹⁰ "a

2 Heisel.

3 Velva G. Darling. "The Law Steps." *The Daily Palo Alto*, 8 Oct. 1924, p. 1.

4 "Here's Fascinating Girl Who Writes New Features." *Santa Cruz News*, 7 Sept. 1929, p. 6.

5 Heisel.

6 Heisel.

7 Heisel.

8 Heisel.

9 Heisel.

10 John S. Daggett. "Saga of Women Will Go On Air." *Los Angeles Times*, 10 Oct. 1930, p. A20.

female Francis Bacon”¹¹ and the voice of a modern, newly liberated generation of women. One paper advertised her column as “modern youth through the eyes of youth!”¹² Velva was known for her frank opinions and her ability to argue both sides of any issue, no matter how serious—or how ridiculous. But references to Velva’s outspoken intellect were always paired with a seemingly obligatory focus on her looks and age. One 1928 piece raved: “Velva understands the flapper as no one else in the world does. That’s because she’s a flapper herself—and incidentally, a mighty pretty one.”¹³ The article went on to promote her work—a syndicated pro/con column and a flapper series later adapted into a screenplay—concluding: “all of which goes to prove that, despite the assertions of scientists and woman-haters, beauty and brains ARE sometimes combined!”¹⁴

This emphasis on Velva’s identity as a “modern girl” can partially be attributed to the spirit of the era in which Velva came of age. During the first World War, women who had previously been confined labor within the home stepped up to take on the work necessary to support the war effort. With all able-bodied men sent away in service to their country, women took on professional duties outside the family structure in unprecedented numbers. After the war’s end, many of these women struggled against the expectation that they would simply return to the comparatively confining reality of their pre-war lives. Out of this resistance, the concept of the “modern woman” was born. Women of the 1920s considered themselves liberated and refused to lose the ground they had gained in their men’s absence. This sense of liberation created a strong

11 “Here’s Fascinating Girl.”

12 “Young Writer to Chat With Boys, Girls on Problems.” *Oakland Tribune*, 7 July 1929, p. A9.

13 *International Illustrated News*, “Even the License is “22 Too!”” *Shamokin Dispatch*, 8 Mar. 1928, p. 10.

14 *International Illustrated News*.

generational identification among women who came of age in the postwar context, and this generational identity provides some explanation for the persistent emphasis on Velva's modernity. Author Birgitte Sølund has investigated the radical reconstruction of womanhood that occurred in this postwar moment. Although Sølund is particularly interested looking at this transformation within a European context, her findings regarding this sense of collective identity appear highly applicable to the experience of American women as well:

The strong generational identification among women who came of age in the postwar decade is particularly evident in their contributions to public discourse, in interviews with journalists, for example, and in letters to newspaper and magazine editors and responses to surveys and opinion polls, individuals frequently chose to speak as representatives of a cohesive group, peppering their language with phrases such as "young girls like us," "we young girls" and "our generation." While such collective language may well have been adopted for the occasion to give personal claims more weight and significance, other evidence also suggests a remarkably strong generational awareness and identification. When asked many years later to recall their youth in the 1920s, women still tended to answer questions about their own lives using "we" rather than "I."¹⁵

Velva's identity as a "modern girl" appealed to a whole generation of women who defined themselves through these collective ideas of liberation and modernity.

Despite her "modern girl" identity, Velva's achievements were in many ways built on the image of the palatable revolutionary. She was bold, but not too bold. Although she argued for women's rights, she could always sympathize with her detractors. Above all, she maintained a persona that emphasized her youth and beauty just as much as her skill behind a typewriter. This duality caused me to question who this "modern girl philosopher" persona truly benefitted. How did this public image

¹⁵ Birgitte Sølund. *Becoming Modern : Young Women and the Reconstruction of Womanhood in the 1920s*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton UP, 2000, 14.

come about and who controlled it? To what extent were her abilities and looks commodified, and who stood to gain from it? Velva was certainly an active participant in her own success, and it's clear that she profited from playing along, but what was the cost? What were the perils of the Velva G. Darling brand? These questions guided my research and the resulting screenplay is one attempt at addressing them. Ultimately, I found that the answers were not clear-cut—both Hearst and Velva benefitted from her eternally youthful persona, for instance—but I believe that in constructing and enacting the “modern girl philosopher” brand, Velva was obliged to continually manage her emotions and behavior, engaging in a kind of emotional labor that women are often compelled to take on as a requisite of professional success. I will return to this idea later within the context of a longer history of self-branding.

Questions of self and commodification remain relevant today, in a society which places increasing value on personal branding, curation of identity and maintenance of a particular “presence”—primarily online. Though initially intended as social tools to connect peers, carefully managed profiles on sites like Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook are increasingly essential to one's professional success. Employers have grown cognizant of potential employees' digital “brands,” and often examine candidates' social media presence and other online activity before moving forward in the hiring process.¹⁶ For others, social media has grown beyond a tool of employment to become the means of employment itself; content creators on sites such as Instagram and YouTube have found ways to monetize their profiles—with a select few achieving

¹⁶ David. G. Jensen. “Building Your Personal Brand.” *Science Magazine*, American Association for the Advancement of Science, 14 Sept. 2016.

astounding financial success.¹⁷ Although Velva’s work and persona existed in a very specific cultural moment, I believe her story continues to resonate in the modern era. The methods and means have changed, but the challenges of establishing a personal “brand” remain. I believe this is especially true for women, even more so for those who live and work in the public eye.

Project Objectives

Before beginning work on this project, I had never heard of Velva G. Darling. Although she experienced quite a lot of success in her lifetime—signing book deals, penning a screenplay, and even flying cross country with famed pilot Charles Lindbergh—her name and career have essentially been lost with time. In one way, I saw this thesis as an opportunity to explore the forgotten story of a fascinating woman who used her intelligence, ambition, and her appeal to stake her claim in an overwhelmingly male-dominated industry. The facts of Velva’s life alone make it a story worth telling, but her struggle to succeed against forces much larger than herself make it a compelling and cinematic narrative.

In addition to telling Velva’s story and exploring the challenges of maintaining a public persona, this project offered the opportunity to push myself to develop a thesis that was both creative and based in historical research. Dramatizing Velva’s career allowed me to refine my skills as a screenwriter and my abilities as a researcher as well. Learning about Velva was surprising and frequently challenging—I was even afforded the chance to perform independent archival research for the first time. This thesis

project allowed me to engage not only the academic skills I've practiced over the last four years but the creative ones too. I believe that creative projects located at this intersection of art and academics are an essential and somewhat neglected aspect of the Honors College experience. This thesis project was designed as a reflection of the most meaningful learning experiences of my undergraduate career.

I felt that it was important to dramatize Velva's story in a screenplay. Although her life would still be fascinating in any form, I saw this as an opportunity to showcase a woman's achievements, written in a woman's voice. In a moment in which women make up only 7% of top directors and only 13% of writers, I believe it is important to prioritize not only women's stories but women as storytellers too.¹⁸ According to a recent study, 2016 saw a 2% decrease in women's involvement in film, down from 19% in 2015 to just 17% last year.¹⁹ This inequality is not limited to roles behind the camera, it persists in front of the lens as well. A recent study surveyed 700 of the top-grossing films from 2007-2014 and found that only 30.2% of speaking characters were women.²⁰ Just 11% of these films featured gender-balanced casts or casts in which girls and women filled roughly half of the speaking roles.²¹ Although Hollywood has made important strides towards equality in recent years, it is important to continue fostering marginalized voices and making space for stories inspired and created by people of color, members of the LGBTQ community, and women. Seeing a diversity of identities and experiences played out onscreen serves to empower new and rising voices. As a

18 Gregg Kilday. "Study: Female Filmmakers Lost Ground in 2016." *Hollywood Reporter*, 12 Jan. 2017,

19 Kilday.

20 Stacy L. Smith, et al. "Inequality in 700 Popular Films: Examining Portrayals of Gender, Race, and LGBT Status from 2007-2014." *Media, Diversity, and Social Change Initiative, USC Annenberg*, p. 1.

21 Smith 1.

female writer, I hope to not only call attention to Velva's story, but to the widespread need to both produce and preserve women's work.

I kept my initial set of questions in mind throughout the course of my work: *How did Velva's public image come to be and who controlled it? Who benefitted from her abilities? What were the drawbacks of maintaining this manufactured image?* I ultimately came to see Velva as both an agent and a product of her own success. A significant part of her job was to sell the idea of herself, and so the "modern girl philosopher" was born. In addition to the promotional labor that Velva performed to sell this flapper image—such as appearing at events and endorsing products—she engaged in a kind of emotional labor as well, a manipulation of emotion and behavior that served to put others at ease and allow her entry into the male-dominated space of print media. Although Velva participated in and benefitted from the commodification of her "modern girl" personality, she was also obligated to perform a sort of emotional labor in enacting this persona. Though male publishers, editors, and managers may have also benefitted from Velva's success, they did not have to carefully control their emotions and behavior in the same way that she did. In many ways, Velva functioned as an agent of her own commodification. Although this sort of self-branding and promotion is often thought of as a recent concept, a result of the digital era, Velva's story demonstrates the historical and enduring nature of this sort of promotional labor.

Section 1: The Research Process

Sources and Research Obstacles

This project represents my first effort to write a creative work based in historical fact. Although I have written both research essays and fictional creative pieces, I have never undertaken a project that combines both in this way. I embarked on the research phase with an open mind, and my process was largely an inductive one. I began by consulting knowledgeable authorities, including Elizabeth Peterson, Humanities Librarian and Curator of Moving Images at The University of Oregon; Andrew Heisel, the writer of “Forever 23,” the article that had first sparked my interest in Velva’s life story; and Rick Marcus, Velva’s surviving son. Ms. Peterson and Mr. Heisel were incredibly helpful in connecting me with resources that helped to fill out my understanding of Velva’s career. Mr. Heisel was also able to put me in touch with Mr. Marcus, with whom he had already established a relationship. Coincidentally, Mr. Marcus lives in Eugene, and I hoped to obtain his permission before pursuing the project. Mr. Marcus not only gave me his blessing, but made himself available to answer questions about Velva’s life. Ultimately, because I chose to focus on Velva’s writing career—a period which occurred before Mr. Marcus’s birth and about which he has limited knowledge—I chose to rely primarily on a combination of her writing and the historical record.

Mr. Marcus had limited access to his mother’s writing because most of her own collection, including scrapbooks of her columns and personal letters, was destroyed in a

1972 earthquake.²² Of course, this loss became an obstacle in my own research as well. Although much of Velva's published writing had turned out to be surprisingly accessible, I had almost no way to read any of her private correspondence. This meant that I only had access to Velva's public persona, which presented a major challenge to my work. I did not feel that I could accurately represent Velva's internal experience without reading her unedited, unpublished thoughts. It became necessary to locate some scrap of personal writing, whether it was diaries, letters or notes, that would grant me some insight not only into Velva as a public figure, but as a private person.

Archival Research

The solution to this problem came with some digging. I searched online for archival collections that might include anything related to Velva and found that UC Berkeley's Bancroft Library was in possession of a box of Velva's letters as a part of their William Randolph Hearst collection. With Dr. Elizabeth Raisanen's help, I decided to apply for a CHC Thesis Grant in order to fund a trip to see the collection. In May of 2017, I traveled to Berkeley and viewed their collection of Velva's correspondence. These letters were all addressed to either William Randolph Hearst or his assistants, and so they were kept as a part of their larger collection of Hearst's papers. In total, there were about thirty items in the collection. In addition to the letters, there were newspaper clippings, telegrams and a few photos. Poring over these documents allowed me to experience a whole new side of Velva, not just her professional persona, but her personal ambition and charm. Working with these materials enriched the quality of my project many times over and provided the

²² Heisel.

foundation for many of the smaller “episodes” which ultimately came to make up the larger narrative of the screenplay.

Working with the Bancroft’s materials also provided insight into Velva’s relationship with Hearst and the performance of her public persona. In one 1927 letter, Velva writes to Hearst regarding an offer she’s received from Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studios. Though she is tempted by the offer, she emphasizes her loyalty to Hearst and his organization. She writes about her own success with a certain sense of detachment, almost as if the ‘writer’ Velva functions separately from herself. “The most important and valuable asset I have is the name I am making for myself in my newspaper and magazine writing,” Velva explains, “under no conditions would I be willing to give up any portion of this.”²³ “I will be very glad to come down and talk with you personally in regard to this matter,” she concludes, “for I don’t want you to misunderstand my motives which are all in the interest of the organization that has put Velva G. Darling on the literary map.”²⁴ She often refers to herself in the third-person in these letters, suggesting a sort of disconnect between her private and public selves. This sense of division had a significant influence on my portrayal of Velva within the script. In scenes such as the publicity shoot with her illustrator Kay Hall, I aimed to show a difference between her behavior within the public eye and out of it.

23 Correspondence from Velva Darling to William Randolph Hearst, 10 Apr. 1927, William Randolph Hearst Papers, BANC MSS 77/121 c., Courtesy The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

24 Correspondence from Velva Darling to William Randolph Hearst, 10 Apr. 1927.

Section 2: Adapting History

Truth and Meaning

The process of adapting history into a creative work has presented many challenges. Although Velva achieved a certain degree of acclaim as both a writer and a public personality, there has been no concentrated effort to preserve her personal writing and records. This left my account of her life's work with a fair number of gaps—places where I could not account for her feelings or actions. Finding creative ways to reckon with these gaps quickly became a central part of the work. I wanted to honor Velva's life in an honest way and, to me, that meant accepting these unknowns as a part of her larger story. While I have worked hard to craft a coherent narrative, I did not feel obligated to fill in every blank. It seemed most authentic to embrace these gaps and find a way to make them a strength of the project rather than a deficit.

I began to think of this dilemma in terms of 'truth' and 'meaning.' I hoped to evoke an emotional response in my audience by creating *meaning* but I also strove to honor Velva's life in an honest way, by showing the *truth* of her world. Within this framework, I thought of 'meaning' as the story's message, a takeaway that viewers could understand and relate to, while 'truth' represented the historical reality of that story—the concrete and known facts. For instance, I know that Velva began writing for *The Daily Palo Alto* in 1924 after being expelled from Stanford's law program—a truth—but the meaning of this changes if she applied to the paper to spite the law school or because she discovered a new passion for writing.²⁵ Quite often I knew *what* Velva did but not precisely *why* or *how*. In filling these gaps, I relied on my research and

²⁵ Velva G. Darling, "The Law Steps," *The Daily Palo Alto*, 8 Oct. 1924, p. 1.

strove to stay true to the factual record while simultaneously telling a larger story about Velva's character and struggle.

Structure and Genre

Ultimately, these narrative gaps came to shape the structure of the script in a dramatic way, as I decided to pursue a fragmentary story structure. When I began outlining the script I struggled to choose between a more traditional narrative structure or a more complicated one that moved between several significant moments in Velva's life. Screenwriting master Robert McKee defines classical story design as: "a story built around an active protagonist who struggles against primarily external forces of antagonism to pursue his or her desire, through continuous time, within a consistent and causally connected fictional reality, to a closed ending of absolute irreversible change."²⁶ Though my script does contain the majority of these elements, it does not conform to a conventional three-act structure taking place in continuous time. This episodic structure initially appeared more daunting, however, it also felt like my best chance to capture both the story's truth and its meaning. I decided that this would be the most effective way to present the narrative, and began working on how to construct it.

I strongly considered using a frame narrative to structure the film. At first, I intended to begin and end with an interview scene, setting the stage for Velva to tell her own tale, but in the end, it seemed that this strategy might only serve to confuse the story due to the amount of exposition and set-up it would require within the constraints of my short script. Ultimately, I chose to focus on a handful of years spanning the rise and fall of Velva's writing career. I wanted to present one major incident or event from

²⁶ Robert McKee. *Story*. Itbooks, HarperCollins Publishers, 1997, p. 45.

each year, stringing them all together to create a larger story exploring the construction and eventual disintegration of Velva's "modern girl" persona. This structure offered the ability to jump time, but in an organized way so as not to confuse the story's timeline. Secondly, it allowed me to include a range of moments that were fundamental to the evolution of Velva's public persona without being restricted to one particular moment in her career. Lastly, this narrative structure embraced the historical gaps I had encountered and made them an essential aspect of the story's form. My research into Velva's incredible life demonstrated just how difficult it is to truly capture the complexities of a person's life onscreen; this episodic structure offered a way to reconstruct Velva's life and work without attempting to collapse it into an oversimplified narrative.

Robert McKee's book *Story*, a thorough guide to the screenwriting process, was instrumental to the process of planning, writing and revising this script. I also referenced Linda Cowgill's *Writing Short Films* and Pat Cooper and Ken Dancyger's *Writing the Short Film* to articulate the specific challenges and strengths of the short as a filmic mode. These books were particularly useful in conceptualizing the structure of my story, and they offered concrete guidance of a process that is often regarded as intangible and mysterious. McKee's writing on genre, as well as story design, beats and controlling ideas were all essential to this project. These concepts helped tremendously to clarify my intentions and categorize the film in terms of genre and structure.

I eventually came to realize that I was attempting to write a biopic that was also a short film, an idea that seemed to contradict itself. A central challenge of the project was to find a way of telling Velva's story effectively and accurately within the short

form. I did not believe that I could adequately craft an entire feature film within the timeframe of this thesis project. Instead, I opted to work within the mode of the short film—wherein the narrative unfolds over a more condensed period of time, usually structured around one act rather than three. Although I didn't initially set out to write a strictly biographical film, as I learned more about Velva's life I became convinced that this is what the project should be. Rather than focus on one particular moment in Velva's career, I wanted to show the longer arc of the “modern girl philosopher” persona—how it was created, enacted, and eventually cast aside. A conflict arose between the condensed form I chose to work in, and the complexity of the story I chose to tell.

I felt that the best solution would be to present the story as a series of vignettes, rather than as a straightforward biography beginning at birth and ending at death. I chose to clearly mark each year at the beginning of each of the script's “chapters” so as not to confuse the audience's perception of time. Each chapter functioned as a narrative microcosm, all adding together to show her larger journey from budding reporter to retired flapper columnist. McKee's writing also helped me to complicate my sense of genre—Velva's story is essentially a tragedy, but it is also a biopic and a coming of age story. McKee explains genre conventions as a source of inspiration; they allow writers to anticipate audience expectations. Once they become familiar with conventions, the writer learns to avoid clichés by alternately satisfying and subverting these expectations.²⁷ In becoming acquainted with the conventions of both the biopic and the tragedy, I worked to both reward and challenge my audience. For instance, I did not

²⁷ McKee 91.

want my script's ending to suggest that Velva had nothing left after retiring from public life. Although it was sad to see her stop writing, she found new purpose in family life and her role as wife and mother. I wanted my audience to feel the weight of her career's end, but to also find the joy of her life's new phase.

Section 3: Modern Connections

The Self, The Brand

A huge component of Velva's success as a columnist was due to the careful management of her image as a modern flapper. Articles about her made frequent mention of her youth, beauty, and authenticity as the voice of a modern generation. In February of 1930, The Oakland Tribune described Velva as "the youngest girl whose writings are syndicated all over America."²⁸ "She is only 23," the piece continues, "but she has a following that may be envied by some of the graybeards among the writing philosophers."²⁹ This colorful write-up was accompanied by a photo of Velva three times larger than the article itself. At the time of this piece's publication, Velva was 28 years old—she'd be 29 in four months. By this point, she had been lying about her age for several years in an attempt to hang on to her fiercely-won girlish persona. The same *Tribune* piece touted her relatability ("Miss Darling is a college graduate [. . .] but that doesn't make her a bit high-hat") and her good looks ("If ever there's a genius beauty contest, Velva Darling ought to walk off with the big silver bathing beach without any cries of "Foul!" from the sidelines").³⁰ Over the course of my research I found several similar articles, all in different words but promoting the same image of Velva as an eternally youthful, precociously wise, shockingly beautiful writer of "modern youth" columns.

Velva's career was built on such fanfare. She worked tirelessly to promote her writer persona, dying her bob haircut blonde and continuously shaving years off of her

28 "Youngest Girl Philosopher Tells How the World Goes 'Round." *Oakland Tribune*, 2 Feb. 1930.

29 "Youngest Girl Philosopher."

30 "Youngest Girl Philosopher."

true age. Although she was employed primarily for her written perspectives on youth and femininity, Velva took on a host of other responsibilities—from judging beauty pageants to advertising portable typewriters—that all functioned to validate her identity and therefore her work.

Some of these responsibilities, such as the careful maintenance of her appearance, behavior, and eternal sense of youthfulness, were both completely invisible and completely essential to her success. She performed this identity in order to be accepted and supported by the almost exclusively male gatekeepers of her industry. In this way, the perpetuation of her “modern girl” persona functioned as a kind of emotional labor—a concept that sociologist Arlie Hochschild coined in 1979 to describe a form of labor that “requires one to induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others.”³¹ As a public figure, Velva was constantly performing this kind of labor by carefully managing others’ perception of her.

This project’s concern with emotional labor and the construction of the public persona continues to be relevant in a modern context, from the service industry to media and entertainment. The enduring pressures of image curation and maintenance have only increased in the Internet age. An engaging online presence can cause friends, fans, and strangers to feel entitled to not only one’s public persona, but private life as well. “Behind the scenes” glimpses into the lives of public figures create an expectation of consistency and flawlessness. We expect people to live up to the image they project at all times. In a 2017 article exploring the phenomenon of “self-branding,” BBC reporter

31 Arlie Russell Hochschild. *The Managed Heart*, Twentieth Anniversary Edition, University of California Press, 2003, p. 7.

Jessica Holland noted “[the] emphasis on presenting a strong public image is especially pronounced in these uncertain economic times; a growing, fiercely competitive “gig economy” has made digital profiles a crucial part of grabbing work opportunities.”³² With freelancing on the rise, individuals are increasingly dependent on their “brand” as a requisite of productive employment.

For some, self-branding is not only the means of landing a job but the job itself. For online “content creators,” including video bloggers, lifestyle writers and online media performers, the content they produce for profit is often inseparable from themselves. Scholar Melita Zajc has explored “the creation of user-generated content in social media as an economic process.”³³ In her work, she examines the duality of content creation and consumption and this creative identity as a form of both participation in and resistance to existing economic structures.³⁴ As creation of original media content becomes increasingly digitized, definitions of labor have had to be expanded. Although creation of user-generated content, or UGC, has been definitively classified as a form of labor, Zajc notes that “contemporary explorations of social media have mostly been structured along the distinction between the creation of UGC as an economic process and as a social process.”³⁵ Participants act on both economic and social motives, blurring the line between labor and social practice.³⁶ Although she lived and worked in a much different era, Velva often occupied this dual space as well. Her

32 Jessica Holland. “The Case Against Personal Brands.” BBC, 23 July 2017.

33 Melita Zajc. “The Social Media Dispositive and Monetization of User-Generated Content.” *Information Society*, vol. 31, no. 1, Jan/Feb2015, pp. 61-67. EBSCOhost, p. 61.

34 Zajc 61.

35 Zajc 61.

36 Zajc 61.

attempts to charm and befriend powerful men, such as William Randolph Hearst and Paul Bern, can be attributed to both social and economic motives.

As methods of online self-branding have become more technologized and intensive, individuals have stepped up to voice their concerns about the burden of self-commodification. Author and Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg displays a surprising degree of skepticism towards branding and self-promotion, considering her integral role at one of the world's most popular social networks. Sandberg asserts: "Crest has a brand. Perrier has a brand. People are not that simple. When we are packaged, we're ineffective and inauthentic."³⁷ Author Jessica Holland also highlights the sense of burn-out experienced by creators who slave to maintain an online presence, noting the "enormous pressure" that comes along with "creating a "perfect" personal brand."³⁸ According to Illana Gershon, an associate professor of anthropology, the all-hours nature of social media branding "introduces a new way of constantly policing yourself. It forces you to be more instrumental about your personal life, seeing yourself as a perpetually performing for a business-driven gaze."³⁹

Articles like Holland's suggest that personal branding is a new concept, unique to the digital age, but my exploration of the past suggests just the opposite. My investigation into the life and work of Velva Darling affirms that self-branding is anything but a new phenomenon. Velva and a team of others—including her lawyers, professional allies, and the authors of the countless puff pieces that appeared in papers across the nation promoting her image and her work—worked tirelessly to refine and

37 Holland.

38 Holland.

39 Holland.

promote an idealized version of Velva herself. Though the means have changed, the pressure to create and maintain a “perfect” brand as a requisite of professional success largely has not. Velva created a professional persona and she stuck to it, even going so far as to sign some letters written to Hearst: “Most sincerely and admiringly, one of the youngest of the Hearst staff, Velva.”⁴⁰ She attached a small headshot to at least one such letter.⁴¹ Publicity pieces branding her as a “modern girl philosopher”⁴² and a “female Francis Bacon”⁴³ appeared often and nationwide. She frequently appeared at events and gave speeches “in character” as an authority on the modern girl, including one wherein she debated herself on the topic of appropriate hemlines.⁴⁴ Although the burnout and alienation associated with the sort of intense, social media-driven self-branding that we experience today may prompt it to adapt, this does not necessarily indicate a “death knell,” as Holland suggests, but rather a continuation, as we have seen in the past.⁴⁵

One explanation for the endurance of this kind of intensive self-branding is the increasingly precarious state of labor. Historically, precarious labor and emotional work has been designated along overwhelmingly gendered lines. It is women who are often expected to perform “the work of care”—forms of labor dependent on “moral knowledge [and] the sense of concern for others.”⁴⁶ As noted by political scholar Estelle

40 Correspondence from Velva Darling to William Randolph Hearst, 4 June 1927, William Randolph Hearst Papers, BANC MSS 77/121 c., Courtesy The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

41 Correspondence from Velva Darling to William Randolph Hearst, 4 June 1927.

42 Daggett.

43 “Here’s Fascinating Girl.”

44 “Girl Writer For Tribune Visits Oakland,” Oakland Tribune, 10 Jan. 1930, p. 5.

45 Holland.

46 Estelle Ferrarese. “Precarity of Work, Precarity of Moral Dispositions: Concern for Others in the Era of “Emotional” Capitalism.” *Women’s Studies Quarterly* 45.3/4 (2017): 183.

Ferrarese, the labor of caring is “devoid of rights, resources, and protections guaranteeing a form of social security.”⁴⁷ “In short,” Ferrarese writes, “it ensures the performance of precarious work.”⁴⁸ Although precarious labor has traditionally been feminized in this sense, the rise of freelancing has spread this insecurity to include young people of all genders. Media industries in particular have experienced a shift away from more traditionally stable modes of employment towards this individual-driven model. Within journalism, financial crises and increasing digitization have paved the way for what Professor Nicole S. Cohen identifies as “entrepreneurial journalism.”⁴⁹ She notes that while this spirit is often embodied in the “venture capital-backed start-up whiz”—the overwhelmingly male founders of media outlets such as FiveThirtyEight and Vox—it is also apparent in the “more marginalized, feminized end of the media worker spectrum: the growing pool of freelance journalists, or solo operators living by selling bits and pieces of work.”⁵⁰ Thanks to economic challenges, ever-changing consumer demands and widespread technological advancement, many young people now face increasingly precarious modes of employment. The rapid spread of this traditionally feminized form of labor might provide us with one explanation as to the enduring practice of personal branding and self-promotion.

47 Ferrarese 187.

48 Ferrarese 187.

49 Nicole S. Cohen. “Entrepreneurial Journalism and the Precarious State of Media Work.” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 114.3 (2015): 513.

50 Cohen 514.

Conclusion

Researching and writing this screenplay has been one of the most challenging and rewarding endeavors of my academic career. I encountered many hurdles over the course of the project, but coming up with creative and viable solutions turned out to be some of the most meaningful parts of the process. From research obstacles to building believable characters, writing Velva's story continuously pushed me to become both a smarter student and a more adept writer. Although there were times I wished I had chosen a more traditional path, I am incredibly proud of what I have produced with this project and eternally grateful to everyone who supported and guided me through the process.

With this project, I hope to shed light not only on the neglected career of Velva Darling, but to explore perpetually relevant questions of identity and presentation. My research into her life suggests that the kind of self-branding and promotion of identity that often think of as a result of technology is in fact a continuation of a much larger history. I hope that this project will in some small way serve to highlight the need to preserve the histories of women, which are often neglected or purposefully erased from the record. I hope that it will remind audiences of the importance of amplifying marginalized voices within media production, and building on their strengths and abilities rather than trying to force them into a mold that doesn't fit. I hope that the future will hold more space for a diversity of storytellers at every level of the filmmaking process.

Appendix



Velva G. Darling – *Oakland Tribune*



“First Woman on New U.S. Air Flight” artist’s sketch and portrait of Velva
– *Oakland Tribune*



Poster Advertising *Hey Hey Henrietta* (1928)



Velva Darling (right) and illustrator Kay Hall – *Oakland Tribune*

Are Girls More Aggressive?
 Sometimes I Think "Yes"—BUT—Sometimes I Think "No"
 By Velva G. Darling



Business

Men brag a lot, about what they could do. But for doing the daring and courageous thing and then rejoicing secretly in it afterwards—the modern girl takes the prize—I sometimes think. That funny old proverb "No woman can keep a secret" has led more men astray than the world dreams of. Women are the best secret-keepers alive! And it doesn't take a gigantic feminine intellect or the charm of a Greta Garbo for the average girl to inveigle any secret possessed by a man out of the innermost recesses of his soul. The modern girl is the most frankly aggressive that women have ever been. But even she resorts to a subtlety, an innocent guilelessness which is apparently devoid of any hint of aggressiveness when she is being her MOST aggressive! You see that lovely girl over

there with the wide blue eyes and the frank, almost diffident air? She looks as though she wouldnt hurt a fly, doesn't she? Would you be surprised if I were to tell you that that girl gets more inside information on the stock market than any man on Wall Street? She does. And it is purely because she is so fightingly AGGRESSIVE—even if she DOESN'T look it with her slim ankles and dainty chic outfit.

But on the other hand, sometimes I think girls are just naturally BORN lazy—like that superlatively languid (and splendid actor) the colored Stepaniecht who draws, "Ah tink ah was jee' BAWN tired!" They like to sit around and dream. And while many of them LOOK innocent and guileless who are really as aggressive as Mussolini, many of them are even MORE innocent than they look! They may pretend to be frightfully worldly. They may SMOKE—but they don't INHALE. They may carry their own hip flasks—but it is full of ginger ale or milk. The flapper made a lot of noise in her day—but many a husband after marrying her discovered she wasn't half so hard-boiled and "wise" as she had pretended.

Men naturally are aggressive—the best thing they do, especially when the girl friend is looking on, is strut. They love to exhibit their prowess, especially if they are positive they will come out the victor. And girls were made content to look on and be the audience, YET many a girl who is called merely Mr. So-and-So's secretary is the real brain who controls the men on the chess board of modern business. No detail escapes her—and with the super-aggressiveness she possesses, she puts her deductions instantly into action. The result—success!

Trademarked, 1925, by Velva G. Darling

"Sometimes I Think Yes, But Sometimes I Think No" by Velva G. Darling,
 illustrated by Kay Hall



1925 Santa Barbara earthquake – Los Angeles Times

DARLING

By

Cosette LeMay

FADE IN:

TITLE OVER: 1923

INT. WAITING ROOM - DAY

VELVA (20s), dark-haired, petite and attractive, sits in a waiting room chair. Her ankles are crossed and a small purse sits in her lap. She looks neat in a skirt and blouse. Her hair is styled in a finger-waved bob.

The waiting room is rather plain. The walls are a generic beige and lonely coat rack stands in the corner. Chairs line the edges of the space, all empty save Velva's.

A SECRETARY (40s), bespectacled and plump, sits directly across from her, filling out papers by hand behind a small but neat desk. A puny sagging plant sits in a pot at the desk's edge.

Velva taps her fingernails on her leg, looking around the small and bare waiting area. She glances down at her hands and frowns.

She rummages within her bag, pulls out a delicate nail file and begins to work away at her nails. The secretary glances up from under her glasses, raises an eyebrow but quickly returns to the paperwork in front of her.

Still filing, Velva begins to hum an upbeat little tune. The secretary's shoulders tense at the sound, but she keeps working. Velva begins to tap her foot along to the sound of her own voice, still scrubbing at her nails.

The secretary glowers. She glances at the small clock on her desk. It's suddenly all too much, her hand lands with a SMACK on her desk as she pushes herself up to stand.

SECRETARY

The Dean will see you now!

Her voice betrays a hint of her frustration, but Velva remains unfazed. She bounces up eagerly, tossing the file back in her bag.

VELVA

You should really give that plant some water.

Velva offers this counsel with a bright smile, oblivious to the secretary's profound irritation. She breezes past the desk to the Dean's office door.

INT. DEAN'S OFFICE - CONTINUOUS

DEAN KIRKWOOD (60s), a bulky man with grey hair and glasses, sits behind a hulking wooden desk. He's deeply involved in the stack of papers in front of him when Velva enters.

She clears her throat and he looks up suddenly.

DEAN KIRKWOOD
Oh, Ms. Darling. Have a seat.

He stands abruptly, gesturing to the chair in front of him, but Velva is already on her way.

She sits, blithe and smiling.

DEAN KIRKWOOD
Are you aware of the reason I asked you in today?

VELVA
Actually, it's a bit of a puzzler. I was mulling it over the whole walk here (*beat*) --Sir.

She grins, trying to charm him.

DEAN KIRKWOOD
We have recently been made aware that you have been selling papers to your fellow law students.

Velva's smile drops suddenly. Her brow furrows.

DEAN KIRKWOOD (CONT'D)
Now we know--

VELVA
--Well, wait one minute! I don't know what you think you've heard, but--

Kirkwood holds up a hand, halting her.

DEAN KIRKWOOD
Ms. Darling, please let me finish. Now, we have it on good authority that you have engaged in dishonest conduct and I'm afraid we must have quite a frank conversation.

Velva shoots forward in her chair.

VELVA

I can frankly tell you that I have never in my life sold an essay--scout's honor! You've got the whole thing balled up, you see--

DEAN KIRKWOOD

I would urge you to be straight with us. Our sources are extremely reliable.

VELVA

I can explain! This whole thing is just one big misunderstanding! You see,

She leans even farther forward, placing her freshly maintained fingers on the edge of his desk.

Kirkwood sits up even straighter.

VELVA (CONT'D)

my friend, she was in real trouble--

DEAN KIRKWOOD

--Be that as it may, this kind of behavior is unacceptable in the law school. I'm afraid that I'll have to ask you to pursue a different course of study.

Velva falls back in her chair, shocked. The outrage is plain on her face. She crosses her arms.

VELVA

Sir, this is unbelievable! I promise if you reevaluate the situation you'll see I did nothing wrong! Say, who's your mysterious source anyway?

DEAN KIRKWOOD

That's confidential. And my decision is final.

He rises, straightens his jacket.

DEAN KIRKWOOD (CONT'D)

Now, I suggest you do some thinking about which program might better fit a girl of your type.

Velva jumps up from her chair. Her purse falls from her lap to the ground.

VELVA

Well listen here, Mr.--

DEAN KIRKWOOD

Good day, Ms. Darling.

Like clockwork, the door behind Velva swings open. Kirkwood's secretary stands waiting. Velva gathers her belongings.

VELVA

This conversation isn't over. I'll appeal.

DEAN KIRKWOOD

Best of luck.

Kirkwood returns to his desk. Velva, looking as if she's got a million more complaints to voice, bites her tongue, takes a deep breath and marches out.

She strides past the secretary through the outer doors.

INT. HALLWAY - CONTINUOUS

The door shuts behind her with a decisive THUD. She stands alone in the empty hallway. A light flickers behind her head.

She seems frozen with rage, staring into nothing ahead of her.

Her eyes focus and she takes in the bulletin board hanging on the opposite wall. She moves closer, focusing in on one flier which reads:

EAGER WRITERS WANTED AT THE DAILY PALO ALTO

STANFORD'S OLDEST STUDENT NEWSPAPER

Velva reaches out and tears the flier off the wall, examining it closely.

INT. DORM ROOM - DAY

Velva throws herself into the chair at her desk. She grabs paper and loads it into her typewriter, fingers fumbling with frantic energy.

At the top of the paper she types out: STORY IDEAS. The sound of each key rings out decisively.

TITLE OVER: 1924

INT. UNIVERSITY HALLWAY - DAY

A STUDENT, freckled with bright red hair, picks up the newest edition of the school newspaper, THE DAILY PALO ALTO.

On the front page is a column entitled "The Law Steps," with the byline "V. G. D."

The student walks down the hall, perusing the column.

VELVA (V.O.)

Women aren't allowed on the Law steps.

(beat)

This prohibition works considerably better than the national one, and many students consider the tradition both justifiable and reasonable.

The student reaches the end of the hallway.

INT. STUDENT UNION - DAY

A group of male students are engaged in a heated discussion. They stand or sit, forming a loose circle. A man in a green sweater sits on a table top, speaking animatedly, holding a copy of the school newspaper tightly in his fist.

VELVA (V.O.)

Entering students have been heard to ask, among other things, when the women are "going to be dropped from the University."

The man finishes a proclamation and shakes the paper at his audience angrily.

INT. DEAN'S OFFICE - DAY

Dean Kirkwood sits reading at his desk. A hand supports his chin as he scans Velva's column.

VELVA (V.O.)

After Stanford had been in existence for a few years, it was noted that the number of women students began continually increasing over the number of men.

He stops with a sigh and removes his glasses to rub at the bridge of his nose. He places the paper down on the desktop, and we see the "V.G.D." byline staring up at him.

EXT. LAW BUILDING - DAY

A group of both male and female students are gathered around the law building steps. Some watch as a few hoist a large banner between the columns decorating the building which reads:

HONOR TRADITION, SAVE THE LAW STEPS

The students cheer as the banner rises.

VELVA (V.O.)

At that time, five hundred seemed a huge crowd, and to limit the enrollment of women by the number they did seemed more than liberal.

INT. JOURNALISM BUILDING - DAY

We see a man from behind, as he pushes an overflowing mail cart down a wide hallway. A sign hanging overhead reads: SCHOOL OF JOURNALISM.

VELVA (V.O.)

Stanford has outgrown and far surpassed the dreams of its founders; but the clause limiting the number of women to five hundred still remains in the contract.

As he passes by an open door, a YOUNG WOMAN with blonde hair and glasses comes out, a large stack of letters under her arm. He hands her a new pile from the cart, which she adds to her existing load.

She walks with purpose down the hall and through an open door with a nearby plaque reading: DAILY PALO ALTO.

INT. DAILY PALO ALTO OFFICE - CONTINUOUS

The woman enters a large, open room housing a host of messy desks. Velva is seated at one, hands poised over the top of her typewriter.

VELVA (V.O.)

If any undergraduate thinks that the women, either because of their small number or for any other reason, are "going to be dropped

VELVA (V.O.)
 from the University," he is
 misinformed. They are far
 outnumbered, yes; but superior
 quantity does not always signify
 superior quality.

She stops in front of Velva, who looks up expectantly.

YOUNG WOMAN
 Mail call!

She drops the stack decisively on Velva's desk. Letters
 spill out every which way, all addressed to "the author of
 "The Law Steps"" and "the columnist V.G.D."

YOUNG WOMAN (CONT'D)
 I took the liberty of peeking. I
 hope you're ready for a fight.

Velva breaks into a grin.

TITLE OVER: 1925

INT. FRIEND'S KITCHEN - MORNING

Velva, halfway dressed in a dark skirt and unbuttoned
 blouse, excitedly dials a rotary telephone. The phone rests
 on a breakfast bar area, which frames the kitchen space like
 a window. Her hair is a mess and her face is flushed.

OPERATOR (O.S.)
 Operator. How can I connect you?

VELVA
 San Francisco Chronicle, please.

OPERATOR (O.S.)
 One moment.

There is a pause as the call is connected. Velva takes the
 opportunity to clip her stockings in place and shove on a
 pair of shoes.

Her friend SUZY (20s) emerges, bleary eyed in a pale
 nightgown. She rubs at her eyes and gives Velva a
 questioning look, right as the line connects. Velva mouths
 "PAPER" and then begins to speak into the phone.

VELVA
 (buttoning her dress)
 Jim? It's Velva.

Suzy shrugs and trudges towards the stove to make coffee.

VELVA (CONT'D)

Listen, I've just caught on the radio that Santa Barbara's been hit with a major quake...yes, yes. Well see, I figure I can be there in an hour or so.

She begins to finger-comb her hair. Suzy has moved on to toast.

VELVA (CONT'D)

Now, you say "photographer," but I hear "chaperone"--why is that?

She pinches her already flushed cheeks for color and smooths her suit.

VELVA (CONT'D)

In three hours it'll be old news!
Just give me your blessing!

(beat)

Yes! Thank you! You won't regret it. I'll call you as soon as it's done.

Velva SLAMS the receiver down in triumph. Suzy winces at the violence. She stands blinking, toast in one hand and coffee in the other. Velva begins to gather her purse and hat.

VELVA (CONT'D)

Suzy, you've been a dear.
Unfortunately, I've gotta run. Duty calls. Be back for dinner.

She swoops over and kisses Suzy on the cheek as she swipes both the coffee and toast. She takes a big bite and heads towards the door.

VELVA (CONT'D)

(mouth full)

Ciao!

Velva slams the door shut. Suzy stands empty-handed and frozen.

SUZY

(under her breath)

Rats.

EXT. GREEN'S GROCERY - DAY

Velva stands talking with an OLDER MAN in an apron in front of a damaged and crumbling storefront. The building's sign, which now hangs crooked, reads GREEN'S GROCERY. The man looks disheveled and tired.

Velva writes in her small notebook.

VELVA

Thank you so much for speaking with me. I do wish you the best of luck in repairing your business.

She tucks the notebook under her arm and extends her hand to the man. He takes it and gives her a sad smile as they shake.

WILSON (30s), a lanky man in a brown suit and fedora, watches the pair shake hands from across the street. He smokes a cigarette lazily as he leans against a damaged building.

He sees her turn to go and takes one last long drag, then drops the cigarette to the ground and crushes it under his shoe.

EXT. DAMAGED STREET - DAY

Velva sits in the passenger seat of her car, hunched over a clunky typewriter that sits in place of a glove box. On the dash in front of her, a book of handwritten notes is splayed flat.

She is parked at the edge of the rubble and chaos, but is completely absorbed in her work. Around her, people have begun the clean-up effort.

Wilson strides towards her, removes his hat and clears his throat.

WILSON

Excuse me, Miss? Can I have a moment?

Velva holds up one finger without looking up from her work.

VELVA

Hold please!

He smiles at the gesture as she finishes her thought, striking the last key emphatically.

VELVA (CONT'D)

Yes, Velva Darling here. What can I do for you?

She leans out from the car and extends one ink-stained hand. He leans down to her level awkwardly. They shake.

WILSON

A fitting name for a gal like yourself.

He gives her a wink. She smiles, then looks down bashfully.

WILSON (CONT'D)

Miss Darling, my name is Bill Wilson and I'm with the Los Angeles Examiner. Say, are you looking for a writing position by any chance? We could use someone of your...type on our staff.

At this, she sits up a bit straighter.

VELVA

Oh? What a tempting offer.

She smiles sweetly at the man, then frowns.

VELVA (CONT'D)

The only thing is, I *am* here on behalf of the Chronicle. They've been awful good to me; I wouldn't want to step on any toes.

The man rises and replaces his hat.

WILSON

Ahh, well that is tough. It was nice to meet you, all the same.

The man turns to leave. Velva looks down at her manuscript and then up at the retreating stranger.

VELVA

Hey! Mister--what'd you say your name was?

The man stops, turns back. He gives her a small smile.

WILSON

Wilson.

VELVA

Well, Mr. Wilson, I'm just about finished here.

She pulls herself up to stand, wiping her ink-stained hands on her skirt.

VELVA (CONT'D)

Would you like to go grab a cup of coffee and talk this over? I know a place.

WILSON

Miss Darling, that sounds lovely.

Velva gives him a grin.

TITLE OVER: 1926

EXT. L.A. EXAMINER OFFICE - DAY

Velva walks confidently down the sidewalk towards the Examiner, a huge building with a facade made up of white arches. She passes through the largest center arch, we see a sign reading LOS ANGELES EXAMINER.

INT. L.A. EXAMINER LOBBY - CONTINUOUS

Velva smiles at FRANK, a security guard sitting behind an official looking desk. She greets him brightly.

VELVA

Morning, Frank!

He returns her cheer.

FRANK

Good morning, Miss Velva.

Velva proceeds under another huge arch and into the main office.

INT. L.A. EXAMINER KITCHEN - CONTINUOUS

She stops in a small, simple kitchen area, where two men stand sipping coffee and chatting. As soon as Velva appears, they stop.

Velva pours herself a cup of coffee from a beat-up percolator.

VELVA
Morning, gentlemen!

The two men nod in response, discomfort on their faces.

INT. L.A. EXAMINER OFFICE - CONTINUOUS

Coffee in hand, she emerges into the main office space, an open area with many desks arranged in neat rows.

She makes her way to her own desk, a little nook covered in notes and a framed photo of Velva with her family.

All along the way, her coworkers seem to talk in hushed tones, shutting up just as she passes.

For just a moment, her face betrays a bit of concern as she takes her seat and glances around the office. Everyone is suddenly absorbed in their work. She takes a breath, opens up a notebook and begins to load paper into her typewriter.

MAGGIE (40s), a grim woman in a long, straight dress appears at the edge of Velva's desk. She looks up to meet the woman's gaze confidently.

VELVA
Good morning, Maggie. What can I do for you?

MAGGIE
Ms. Darling. Let's step into my office for a moment.

INT. MAGGIE'S OFFICE - DAY

Maggie sits behind a heavy-looking large desk. Velva is seated opposite her in a hard metal chair.

Velva sits with her knees pressed together and her hands in her lap. Maggie leans forward onto the desk and interlaces her fingers. For a beat, they sit in silence.

MAGGIE
Ms. Darling...is there anything you'd like to discuss today?

Velva smiles uneasily.

VELVA
Not particularly.

Her concern returns.

VELVA (CONT'D)
Maggie, is something wrong?

MAGGIE
It seems we have a bit of a situation. Your name made an appearance in the evening news last night, in multiple papers.

Velva's brow furrows in confusion.

VELVA
Me? But why?

MAGGIE
It would seem they have it in their heads that you've been married before. There are reports that you were married to one...

Maggie glances down at a telegram, placing a small pair of reading glasses on her nose.

MAGGIE (CONT'D)
...John Dorcy? After you graduated. They found that the fellow fled to China and left you in quite a tight spot.

Velva realizes what this is about, her shoulders slump in relief. Her brow relaxes and she releases the breath she'd been holding.

Maggie puts the telegram back down, removes the glasses.

MAGGIE (CONT'D)
Velva, is this true?

VELVA
That's what this is all about?
Johnny?!

She places a hand on her chest in a gesture of relief.

Now it is Maggie who looks confused.

MAGGIE
I don't understand. Were you not married?

VELVA
Yes, yes! Of course I was! It says so right there on your telegram.

She gestures to the piece of paper on the desk.

MAGGIE

Well then I fail to see why you're so cavalier. Velva, this looks bad.

VELVA

It was a mistake, Maggie. We got it annulled and no one was the wiser!

MAGGIE

Everyone's the wiser now!

Velva scoffs but Maggie is clearly upset. She lets out a heavy sigh.

MAGGIE (CONT'D)

You know, I understand you're the Examiner's voice of youth and you lead a...certain lifestyle. But we have a reputation to uphold. We can't have our writers eloping with strangers who disappear on boats to China.

Velva's eyes widen. She throws her arms out to the side.

VELVA

But that's just it! I'm the voice of the modern woman, aren't I? The modern woman can divorce!

MAGGIE

Maybe so. But Velva, you can't. From now on, you need to keep the paper in mind before you venture off on some...

She waves her hand, searching for the right term.

MAGGIE (CONT'D)

...wild scheme!

VELVA

(lowered voice)

It was hardly that, Maggie. I cared about him.

MAGGIE

This incident was unacceptable. I believe you should do some thinking about exactly how much your place at the Examiner means to you.

Velva sits in a rare silence. She stares back at Maggie moodily, arms crossed.

MAGGIE
You're dismissed.

Maggie returns to her own work, donning her reading glasses once again. Velva slowly rises to leave.

MAGGIE
And Velva?

Velva pauses, looks back. Maggie does not even bother to look up from her papers.

MAGGIE (CONT'D)
Close that door behind you.

Velva does as she's told.

TITLE OVER: 1927

In a series of cuts, we see professional Velva in action.

INT. BALLROOM - DAY

Velva sits on the judging panel at a beauty pageant. She claps and smiles warmly as the women parade across the stage in dresses and sashes. A large banner overhead reads: MISS ORANGE COUNTY.

INT. HAIR SALON - DAY

She walks through a hair salon, engaged in conversation with the store's female owner. Velva takes notes as she walks and talks with the woman. Around them, other women sit in various stages of cutting, styling, drying and washing. Velva listens intently as the woman speaks and gestures.

EXT. BEACH - DAY

Velva smiles for a picture with a group of pageant finalists. Two girls stand on either side of her, clad in the modest swimwear of 1927, proudly sporting winner's sashes. Velva wears a collared dress that reaches all the way below the knee and a small sun hat. She smiles for the flash, but her posture and expression betray a distinct discomfort.

INT. WEDDING SHOP - DAY

Velva walks the floor of a wedding shop with an older man. She's once again taking notes as they walk through huge racks of dresses and chat. This time she's more subdued, silently making notes as the man drones on. She's not asking questions; she barely nods.

INT. BALLROOM 1 - DAY

Velva sits on another judging panel as contestants parade across the stage in talent costumes. She claps politely, but her smile is tight and forced.

A banner onstage reads: MISS CALIFORNIA GOLD

INT. BALLROOM 2 - DAY

Different panel, different contestants--this time in gowns. The banner reads: MISS SAN BERNADINO.

Velva's clapping begins to lag, her forced smile droops.

INT. BALLROOM 3 - DAY

Panel, contestants in swimwear. Banner: MISS ANAHEIM BEAUTY.

Velva claps along with the rest, her face is a blank mask, devoid of emotion.

END MONTAGE.

INT. VELVA'S BEDROOM - DAY

Velva sits at a desk in her bedroom, facing her typewriter. She wears a light pink headscarf in her dark hair.

She loads a piece of paper and prepares.

She speaks aloud as she types the opening paragraph.

VELVA

Dear Mr. Hearst: I would like to explain this situation in regard to the Metro-Goldwyn Mayer Studios more fully, so that you will be better able to judge what I should do.

EXT. MGM PARTY - NIGHT

We see the dance floor at a glamorous MGM party from above. Women's beaded dresses shimmy and shake as they dance with dark-suited men. The camera floats and spins as we move down to eye-level.

VELVA (V.O.)

When I was on the MGM lots last
week I talked with Paul Bern, whom
I met through Louis B. Mayer
several months ago.

Our gaze shifts to a long bar where men open bottles of champagne. The women around them SHRIEK at the pop of the cork.

We move from the bar to find Velva, dressed to the nines in a beaded flapper shift and matching headband, sitting in a corner with her friend Suzy.

Velva suddenly sits up straight as she catches sight of someone across the room. She nudges her friend, who seems fully consumed by the cocktail in her gloved hand.

VELVA

Suz, that's Paul Bern! I read about
him--he's a movie writer!

She turns back to her friend.

VELVA (CONT'D)

Do I look alright?

Suzy begins to respond but Velva steamrolls on. She thrusts her drink in to Suzy's hand and stands.

VELVA (CONT'D)

I've gotta go talk to him! Suzy,
hold down the fort.

She's off, making her way towards the bar.

SUZY

(to no one)
You got it.

INT. PARTY BAR - NIGHT

Velva sidles up to BERN (late 30s), who sits with his forearms leaning heavily on the bar. An empty glass sits in front of him. He has a faraway look, and seems much more consumed with his thoughts than the party scene playing out around him.

Velva addresses the BARTENDER with a wink.

VELVA
Gimme two gin and tonics.

At the sound of her voice, Bern starts and turns to look at Velva. She gives him a playful smile.

VELVA
Come here often?

Bern attempts a smile and achieves a grimace.

BERN
Not too often, I'm afraid.

The drinks arrive. Velva offers one to her companion. She holds hers high for a toast.

VELVA
Well then, to new adventures!

Bern hoists his glass in return. They sip.

Velva extends her gloved hand.

VELVA
Miss Velva G. Darling. Pleased to meet you.

Bern shakes it firmly.

BERN
Paul Bern. Thanks for the drink.

VELVA
But of course! I'm glad to know Hollywood will never abide this prohibition nonsense.

She takes a healthy sip and smiles up at Bern. He chuckles in response.

VELVA (CONT'D)

Say, Mr. Bern, would you like to dance?

BERN

Oh no, I'm afraid I'm not much of a dancer--

He tries to protest but Velva has already abandoned her drink and begins to pull at his sleeve, headed in the direction of the dance floor.

Worry shows in Bern's eyes but Velva jumps in to reassure him.

VELVA

Don't worry, Mr. Bern. I'll take the lead. And I won't take no for an answer.

He sighs, resigned to her will. He lets his drink go and takes her hand.

INT. DANCE FLOOR - CONTINUOUS

She leads him to the center of the dance floor, where she begins to swing to the bright, brassy music.

Bern looks around nervously. He begins to move stiffly, his face still contorted into a grimace.

VELVA (CONT'D)

That's it Mr. Bern! You've got it!

Velva moves in closer to take his hand. She places her other hand on his shoulder. He begins to match her pace. Velva HOOTS in delight.

In a series of cuts, we see them continue to dance. Bern gains confidence. His movements are awkward but he loses stiffness, begins to smile and laugh. Velva's moves are wild and committed. Her arms and legs swing out wide from her body.

INT. BAR - NIGHT

Velva and Bern collapse laughingly back at the bar. Bern is looser, more comfortable, flushed with alcohol and exertion.

BERN

(winded)

Miss Darling, you are quite the dance partner.

VELVA
(giggling)
Mr. Bern, you are quite the
character.

The camera begins to pull back from the bar, upwards towards
the ceiling.

VELVA (V.O.)
Bern appeared very much impressed
with the writing I had done on
modern life in general and the
modern woman in particular,

We see Bern and Velva from above, then pan back over to the
dance floor, where couples continue to hop and spin in a
frenzy of movement.

VELVA (V.O.)
He feels sure that I can write the
fresh, light, yet poignant sort of
things that he wants for Marion
Davies and Norma Shearer.

INT. VELVA'S STUDY - DAY

We see Velva once again seated in front of her typewriter.
She loads a piece of paper into the machine.

VELVA (V.O.)
I told him that I could not
consider working for him,

She types the words "RUBBER: AN ORIGINAL SCREENPLAY BY VELVA
G. DARLING"

VELVA (V.O.)
But if he is willing to accept any
spare time and spare ideas, I could
see no reason why I should not give
them to him.

INT. EXAMINER OFFICE - DAY

Velva strides across the Examiner office space and into
Maggie's office, where she drops the manuscript of her
latest column. The headline reads:

DO MEN LIKE FLATTERY?

Sometimes I Think "Yes" BUT Sometimes I Think "No"

By Velva G. Darling

Velva smiles tentatively at Maggie, who leans back in her chair, arms firmly crossed.

VELVA (V.O.)

The most important and valuable asset I have is the name I am making for myself in my newspaper and magazine writing.

INT. BERN'S OFFICE - DAY

Velva stands across from Bern, who remains seated behind his desk. Her screenplay, RUBBER, sits on the desktop. She sits facing him, head dropped low in her hands. He leans back with his hands up, in a posture apologetic yet defensive.

VELVA (V.O.)

Under no conditions would I be willing to give up any portion of this. What the Los Angeles Examiner and the King Features Syndicate has already done for me cannot be bought, and I would not give it up for any amount of money.

Velva buries her fingers in her hair. Bern shakes his head regretfully.

INT. VELVA'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Velva sits at a vanity. Her hair is in curlers and she rubs cold cream onto her face.

VELVA (V.O.)

I will be very glad to come down and talk with you personally in regard to this matter for I don't want you to misunderstand my motives...

When she's done, she lingers for a moment, examining her reflection with a look of dissatisfaction.

INT. VELVA'S BEDROOM - DAY

We return to the typewriter, where Velva concludes her letter. She's wearing the same pink headscarf.

VELVA (V.O.)

...which are all in the interest of the organization that has put Velva G. Darling on the literary map.

She pulls the paper from the machine and uses a pot of glue to attach a tiny print of her headshot to the bottom of the letter.

VELVA (V.O.)
 Very sincerely yours, one of the
 youngest of the Hearst staff, Velva

Velva leans back to assess her handiwork. She sighs heavily.

Dropping the letter, turns to gaze out the window, chin resting heavily on her hands.

A pair of kids, a boy and a girl, play in the neighbors' yard across the street. They chase each other around the grass screeching and laughing.

Velva drops her gaze.

TITLE OVER: 1928

INT. PHOTOGRAPHY STUDIO - DAY

Velva and KAY HALL (20), "Thinks" column illustrator, pose in front of a blank backdrop. Kay is more awkward in front of the camera. She is cute where Velva is sophisticated.

Kay, wearing a professional skirt suit and cloche hat, holds an illustration and smiles towards the camera.

Velva, dressed in a huge fur coat and her own adorned hat, holds a pen over Kay's drawing and stares off dramatically into the distance. Velva stands slightly in front of Kay, taking up more space in the frame.

They hold the pose. THE PHOTOGRAPHER (40s) coaches from behind his camera. He wears no jacket and his hair is mussed. He grins at Velva.

PHOTOGRAPHER
 Just like that, ladies. Beautiful.
 That's just great, Velva. Just
 great.

Velva smiles at the photographer and even gives him a wink as she adjusts to a new pose. She places her hand under her chin, pen in hand, looking thoughtful.

Kay looks annoyed at the personal attention Velva is getting. She tries to maneuver herself in front of Velva, but the big fur coat gets in the way.

PHOTOGRAPHER

Kay? Stay right in that spot,
honey. Lovely.

He shoots a few more as Velva vamps and giggles playfully.
Kay is struggling to maintain a smile, fighting for space.

PHOTOGRAPHER

Alright. Let's break for a bit.

The women relax as the camera is lowered. Velva maintains
her flirty smile but Kay's face begins to drop.

EXT. FIRE ESCAPE - DAY

Velva and Kay emerge. Velva removes her hat to reveal a
newly blonde bob, which she pats nervously. Kay GASPS a bit
at the reveal.

VELVA

What?

KAY

Nothing. It's...different.

VELVA

It was Joe's idea. It's supposed to
make me look more (irony)"fun."

She reaches into her small purse and pulls out an engraved
cigarette case and matching lighter. She offers one to Kay,
who snatches it without hesitation. Velva lights hers, then
passes the lighter to Kay.

The women stand looking out over the city spread in front of
them.

VELVA

These events are all so exhausting.

Kay responds after a long drag.

KAY

I don't know...I think its kind of
exciting.

VELVA

That's because you're new to it.
Trust me, soon you'll be sick of
the whole scene.

Kay scoffs at her blatant cynicism. Her posture hardens
defensively.

KAY
It hardly seems like you have
reason to complain, Miss Hollywood
Makeover.

She uses her cigarette to gesture at Velva's lightened hair
with a angry flick of her wrist.

She pauses a second, then her face contorts into a smirk.
She turns to Velva.

KAY (CONT'D)
Is it...because of your age?

She stares at Velva with exaggeratedly feigned innocence.
Velva is caught off guard, confused.

VELVA
Excuse me?

KAY
The hair. Is it because you're
nearly--

She drops her voice down to a stage whisper.

KAY (CONT'D)
--thirty?

Panic seeps into Velva's face. She turns back to face the
skyline.

VELVA
I don't know what you're talking
about.

KAY
Oh, I'm sorry. I forgot. "She's 22,
too!" Right?

She lets out a scoff.

KAY (CONT'D)
I've read your work. You've been 22
for a while, huh?

Velva keeps staring straight ahead. Her shoulders begin to
creep up but she catches herself, elongates her neck
defiantly.

Kay steps in a bit closer, lowers her voice.

KAY (CONT'D)

Don't worry, there's always the
bridal beat.

Kay flicks her cigarette over the railing's edge.

Velva flinches. She finally turns to meet Kay's gaze. Her
face is a hard mask of anger.

KAY

Well, better get back to it.

Kay breaks into a grin that doesn't quite reach her eyes.

KAY (CONT'D)

See you in there, *kid*.

She breezes past Velva and in the door.

Velva lingers on the fire escape, her face a picture of rage
and hurt. She stubs out her cigarette and flicks it over the
railing.

She dabs quickly at her welling eyes, then exhales a long
breath.

TITLE OVER: 1929

EXT. FOX STUDIO LOT - DAY

Velva pulls onto the Fox Studio lot behind the wheel of a
light blue Ford roadster. The lot is bustling with activity.

She parks the car and makes her way towards a soundstage.

A group of men in overalls pass by. Velva smiles at them
brightly.

VELVA

Good afternoon!

INT. FOX SOUNDSTAGE - DAY

Velva quietly makes her way onto the set and takes a seat in
a chair marked "Ms. Darling."

The production is between takes. THE DIRECTOR, a round and
red man, barks out instructions to the cast and crew as they
move to the top of the scene.

They're shooting an intimate romantic scene between the
film's two leads. The woman wears the signature beaded shift
of the flapper, the man, a tailored suit.

They both sport the melodramatic makeup of the black and white silent era.

The set is decorated to look like an elegant balcony. Fake trees and flowers provide a sense of the outdoors.

Velva pulls out a small notebook and begins excitedly writing as she watches.

The cast and crew assume their places. A small group of men crowd around a camera on stilts.

A YOUNG MAN steps in front of the lens. He holds a chalkboard reading:

MR. WEST

"HENRIETTA"

SCENE 7, TAKE 3

YOUNG MAN

Quiet on set! Scene 7, take 3.

A hush falls over the set

DIRECTOR

Action!

The scene is suddenly set in motion. The man and woman hold each other close, pantomiming exaggerated romance for the camera. The director calls out commands.

Velva is delighted. She can't stop smiling at the tableau before her.

DIRECTOR (O.S.)

Cut!

EXT. FOX STUDIO LOT - DAY

Velva drives in and parks once again. This time, she strides confidently towards an office building.

INT. FOX OFFICE BUILDING - CONTINUOUS

She strolls down a hallway to find the meeting room. She peeks in through the open door to find two STUDIO EXECUTIVES already seated comfortably, cigarettes in hand. They rise as she enters.

EXEC 1

Velva! Come in! Have a seat!

She places her bag on the table, then sits. The men
resettle.

VELVA

Hello, gentlemen! Sorry I'm a bit
late.

EXEC 2

Don't worry about it. Thanks for
making it all the way out here.

He brushes her off with the wave of a hand.

VELVA

Absolutely! You know I'm happy to
do what needs done for the film.

She lights her own cigarette and leans back, legs crossed.

VELVA (CONT'D)

Now, what is it you wanted to talk
about? How's production going?
Actually, if we have time to
discuss them I have a few notes--

She begins to dig in her bag with her free hand, searching
for her notebook. The men exchange a glance.

EXEC 1

Well, it's not exactly...going. At
the moment.

Velva stops searching, suddenly concerned.

VELVA

What do you mean? I was here just
last week!

EXEC 2

The script's good, Velva. It's real
good. But, well, the moment is just
wrong.

He leans forward to rest his arms on the table.

EXEC 1

We've decided to suspend production
on the film.

Velva's brows draw together in confusion.

VELVA
But it was going so well! The
film--it's nearly finished--

EXEC 1
--We're just not sure it's the
right time to release a flapper
picture.

The men lean back in their chairs.

EXEC 2
Our ticket sales show that people
just aren't interested in the whole
scene right now.

Velva is affronted. She frowns deeply, offended.

VELVA
(louder)
My script is more than a flapper
picture! Sure, it takes place in a
certain...social context. But it's
more than that--it's a story of
youth! It's a romance--

The second man leans forward towards her.

EXEC 2
We understand how much this film
means to you. Trust me, if there
was a way to save it, we would. The
timing's just not right, doll.

He spreads his hands as if there's nothing he can do.

VELVA
I can make changes! Just give me a
chance.

EXEC 1
We're sorry, Velva. It's really not
our call.

Velva slumps in her chair, defeated.

After a moment, one of the men reaches for her hand, which
rests on the table between them.

EXEC 2
We're real sorry, honey. You wanna
grab a drink? I bet it'll make you
feel better.

Velva looks at the man with a mixture of disappointment and disdain. She draws her hand back sharply, then sinks heavily into her chair as if all the air has gone out of her.

TITLE OVER: 1930

INT. LAW OFFICE - DAY

Velva sits across from EUGENE MARCUS (30s). A large wooden desk separates them.

Marcus is sturdy, not overly handsome but with a kind face. His dark hair is neatly styled. He pages thoughtfully through a small pile of documents on his desk.

Velva looks uncharacteristically small. She sits curled into herself in her chair. Her hands are fidgety- she picks incessantly at the beading on her small handbag.

The pair sits in tense silence for a few beats.

VELVA

So, what do you think? Do we have a case or not?

Marcus thinks for a moment longer. He folds his hands contemplatively.

MARCUS

Ms. Darling, I believe that we do.

His words visibly ease Velva's tension. Her posture relaxes and she nods tentatively as he explains.

MARCUS (CONT'D)

It would appear that the radio station broke the terms of your contract when they fired you. There's nothing in here that entitles them to terminate you over content complaints.

Velva takes this in. She still looks crumpled and small, but her hands are still for the moment. She looks up at Marcus. A ghost of her usual determination seems to surface in her eyes. Her jaw hardens.

VELVA

Alright. What do we do?

Marcus meets her eyes.

MARCUS

We sue the suckers.

At this, Velva allows a small smile.

Marcus pulls a business card from a drawer in his desk and makes a note on it.

MARCUS

Come in Tuesday at 2:00 and we'll talk strategy. I feel good about this one.

Velva takes the card from his hand and stands.

VELVA

Thank you, Mr. Marcus.

He stands as well, offers his hand.

MARCUS

Please, call me Eugene.

Velva shakes his hand slowly. Her face spreads into a smile.

VELVA

Thank you, Eugene.

INT. RESTAURANT - NIGHT

Velva and Marcus sit chatting over dinner. The place is nice, flatteringly lit with a sedate ambiance. The two of them are comfortable, dressed nicely.

MARCUS

So, you're a writer, huh? How'd you end up on the radio?

He takes a bite of his food. Velva glances down at her plate.

VELVA

I had a daily column, you may have heard of it. "Sometimes I Think Yes"?

Marcus nods in understanding.

VELVA (CONT'D)

I'd been writing it a while, then I got this new offer. A 15-minute nightly talk.

She shrugs.

VELVA (CONT'D)
I'd never done radio before, it
seemed exciting.

She trails off, pushes the food around on her plate. She
lays her fork down.

VELVA (CONT'D)
What about you? How'd you get into
law?

MARCUS
(jokingly)
I was never too good with my hands,
but I did know how to argue.
Figured I ought to make something
out of myself. Here we are.

Velva chuckles at his self deprecation. She rests her chin
on her hands.

VELVA
I studied law myself. For a while,
I mean, in college. I switched to
English later, obviously.

MARCUS
Oh, really? That's quite something.
What made you switch?

Velva sits up straighter, drops her hands.

VELVA
Just didn't suit me, I suppose.

Just at that moment, a waiter arrives with the check. Marcus
accepts it with a nod.

EXT. RESTAURANT - NIGHT

Velva and Marcus stand at the curb outside the restaurant's
front doors. Marcus stands with one hand in his pocket, the
other rests on the top of the cab door he holds open for
Velva. Her hands clutch at her small handbag as she stands
next to the open door.

MARCUS
Well, Miss Velva. Thank you for a
lovely evening.

VELVA
Of course. Have a good night,
Eugene.

They linger for a moment, then Velva climbs in. Marcus shuts the door behind her and steps back on to the curb as the car pulls away.

INT. COURTROOM - DAY

Velva, neatly dressed, sits at the front of a courtroom next to Marcus.

On the other side sit THREE MEN dressed in suits. All parties face the old and wizened JUDGE at the bench.

A COURT REPORTER sits poised to record. The rest of the courtroom is empty.

JUDGE

Counsel.

Marcus rises gracefully and addresses the judge.

Velva is calm and poised at his side, seated with her legs crossed. She is dressed in a conservative skirt and her hair is neatly combed. She is fresh faced and looks to be barely wearing makeup.

MARCUS

Your honor, my client has suffered over \$2000 in lost income and pain both personal and professional as a result of her wrongful and impulsive termination, after just one single complaint that her show was "too risqué." The termination of Miss Darling's program was unjustified and abrupt and in fact represents a major breach of contract on behalf of United Broadcast. I am confident that you will find Misters Davis and Kleary acted in a way that was both unfair and unlawful and my client should be compensated as such. Thank you.

The suits at the other bench look in turns smug and irritated as Marcus returns to his seat.

Velva does not turn her head to look at them, but remains gazing straight ahead, she raises her chin slightly.

JUDGE

Thank you Mr. Marcus. Mr. Winters?

WINTERS (30s), United Broadcast's attorney, rises to make his argument. He wears a dark suit and an arrogant smirk. Velva seems to look through him.

WINTERS

Your honor, Ms. Darling's employment was terminated after the company received complaints about the content of her show. She was hired at the discretion of the company and fired at their discretion too. She failed to uphold the company's standards of family-friendly radio programming, and we were forced to respond.

Velva continues to stare straight ahead.

WINTERS (CONT'D)

Your Honor, Ms. Darling's termination was neither abrupt nor dishonest. I believe you will find that United Broadcast was well within its rights to cancel Miss Darling's show after it's questionable moral content became apparent.

The attorney returns to his seat.

The United lawyers smirk at Velva's unusual quiet. She continues to ignore them.

INT. COURT HALLWAY - DAY

Velva and Marcus slip into an alcove in the area outside the courtroom. Velva gazes out a sunny window, arms wrapped around herself protectively. Her eyes begin to well up.

MARCUS

Hey, hey, what's wrong? We were great in there!

VELVA

(cracking with emotion)
It's just too much.

MARCUS

Too much? Velva, we've got a solid case. United was in the wrong!

Velva turns to look at Marcus. Her eyes are wet and her chin trembles.

VELVA

Did you see the way they looked at me?!

(beat, then weakly)
I'm finished.

Marcus places his hands on her shoulders, turning her to face him. He speaks softly and directly to her.

MARCUS

Listen to me. You're talented, you're smart, and you're going to be just fine.

He pulls her in for a hug just as the tears begin to fall. After a moment, she wraps her arms around him too.

TITLE OVER: 1931

INT. WAITING ROOM - DAY

Velva sits calmly, hands folded in her lap. She looks around the waiting room, which is decorated with plants and small paintings of landscapes.

She notices a small hole at the edge of her skirt and moves to quickly cover it from view.

A pretty young SECRETARY (20s) addresses her in a quiet voice from behind a desk.

SECRETARY

Ms. Darling? Mr. Hearst will see you now.

Velva rises. She nods her thanks at the secretary with a small smile.

INT. HEARST'S OFFICE - DAY

Velva stands in front of the door for a beat, waiting to be acknowledged. HEARST (late 60s), is bent over his desktop writing. He looks up. Finally.

HEARST

Velva! Have a seat.

He doesn't stand, but gestures at the seat across from him.

She smiles with relief and moves to sit.

HEARST

How the devil are you?

She arranges her skirt to hide its imperfection and places her bag in her lap.

VELVA

Quite well! Keeping myself busy with radio. And yourself?

HEARST

Oh, you know me, Darling. I stay occupied.

She smiles at him politely.

VELVA

Of course.

HEARST

But I hear congratulations are in order! I was recently informed that the one and only Velva Darling is engaged!

Velva looks down bashfully.

VELVA

Oh yes, we're quite happy.

HEARST

Who's the lucky gent?

VELVA

Mr. Eugene Marcus. A lawyer.

HEARST

Ahh you've netted yourself quite a catch, hey? At this rate you can finally quit this whole racket.

Velva furrows her brow lightly.

VELVA

Well-I suppose that is true. But that's precisely what I'd hoped to talk to you about--

HEARST

Oh?

She sits up a bit straighter.

VELVA

Well, as you must know, I have enjoyed a series of engagements in radio programming--I described them quite thoroughly in my letter--

HEARST

Oh yes, "Women's Achievement Hour" and such.

VELVA

Yes! In addition, my columns are still published in over fifty papers around the country--an achievement I credit to you almost entirely! But, you see these other syndicates, they have me speaking and writing about such silly things--beauty creams and hairstyles--

HEARST

The subjects female readers enjoy!

VELVA

Maybe so. But I must admit that I long to address more serious stuff. Even housewives today are more concerned with real issues.

Hearst leans back in his chair as she makes her pitch.

VELVA (CONT'D)

I believe with the help of yourself and the King Features Syndicate I could reach a much wider audience!

HEARST

Darling, are you making a pitch for re-employment?

She looks encouraged by his understanding. At this point she's on the edge of her seat.

VELVA

Mr. Hearst, it was you who first believed in me, who shaped me into the "modern girl philosopher" herself!

Hearst crosses his arms in contemplation as she begins to pick up steam.

VELVA (CONT'D)

(increasingly fervent)

The modern girl is the greatest single force in the country today--the only thing lacking is a girl to speak for her! I believe I fill that place, and could fill it much more fully if I had your advice and help behind me. You know the publishing business, and I know the modern girl! Together we could capture a whole segment of the reading market which is routinely ignored, or worse, infantilized!

She catches her breath.

VELVA (CONT'D)

So what do you say?

Hearst leans forward, resting his arms on his desk.

HEARST

Darling, you're absolutely irresistible. Give me twenty-four hours to think it over. I'll contact you in the next few days.

A triumphant grin spreads across Velva's face. The two of them stand. Velva reaches across the desk to shake hands enthusiastically. Hearst moves to escort her out.

HEARST

I have great admiration for your tenacity, Velva. Thanks for stopping by.

VELVA

The pleasure is mine, Mr. Hearst. This meeting has been positively energizing!

They reach the door. Velva turns back.

VELVA

I look forward to hearing from you.

HEARST

Absolutely.

(beat)

And remember to enjoy your engagement, Darling. It's the most carefree moment of the whole production.

VELVA
I certainly will. Goodbye, Mr.
Hearst.

She gives him a bright smile.

HEARST
Goodbye, Darling.

The door closes in finality.

INT. VELVA'S BEDROOM -NIGHT

Velva sits at a mirrored vanity brushing her hair. She wears a silky dressing gown and her face is bare. The bedroom is softly lit around her.

She reaches for a small jar of cold cream.

VELVA
(calling out to Marcus)
Have you checked the mail today? I'm
expecting something important.

She unscrews the lid and begins applying it to her face.

MARCUS (O.S.)
(calling back to her)
I brought it in earlier, but it
just looked like bills.

Velva's motions become slower.

VELVA
Alright. I'll check again tomorrow.

She finishes applying the cream and pauses with her hands on her face. She gazes into her reflection, pushing the skin slightly upwards with her hands.

She lets go with a sigh and stands. She walks away from the dressing table and exits the bedroom.

We linger at the mirror for a moment more. In large letters, the title appears on the screen:

DARLING

FADE OUT.

THE END.

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