

### #3 - Joan, Rose, Sadie, Mollie

*JOAN (redistributing the pieces):* It's all right, we can fix them. No one will know. (*sits down at MOLLIE'S machine.*) Sleeves! Haven't done this in a while. But you never forget.

*ROSE:* Joan, please, you must not think that any of us were the cause of this trouble.

*JOAN:* Were you talking?

*SADIE:* Only a little. I'm getting married—

*JOAN:* Talking is forbidden. Production is slipping at this table, especially yours, Sadie. Your place at the machine is worth more than you are.

*SADIE (teary, frantic):* I'm sorry, I'm sorry.

*JOAN:* There are plenty of ambitious girls out there just waiting for you to fall. Girls who will single-handedly save their families from poverty. Until they burn out. Or just burn. Girls like Mollie. (*to MOLLIE:*) Go on and be the Forewoman for a while. You will be someday. (*The others are stunned, indignant.*)

*ROSE:* She was trying to get us to join a union. But we're not!

*SADIE:* And said bad things about the war, we heard her.

*ROSE:* I think she's the one planting those papers. (*ROSE reaches into a basket and produces one of the pamphlets.*)

*JOAN:* So that's what this is. (*reaches under some cloth at MOLLIE'S station, finds another pamphlet, reads.*) "Workers and the Conquest of Bread!" (*JOAN opens the pamphlet and places it on her lap as she sews.*)

*MOLLIE:* Guns without bread are worthless.

*JOAN:* Oh, I'm sure they are. She reads like this, one eye on the needle, the other on the page— (*paging through; amused*): The important parts are marked with stars! (*reading, while working; the others listen uncertainly*): "Because to be a worker now means to shut yourself up for twelve hours a day in an unhealthy workshop for wages you can barely live on, and to remain riveted to the same task for twenty or thirty years—

*MOLLIE:* —and maybe for your whole life!"

*JOAN:* Yes, exactly—word for word! (*dramatic*): "What we proclaim is THE RIGHT TO WELL-BEING: WELL-BEING FOR ALL!" (*The other women at last feel it's safe to laugh.*)

*MOLLIE (with forced patience):* I understand this mindless work has all but crushed your spirits.

*ROSE:* Speak for yourself!

*MOLLIE:* And you for yours! For just one moment raise your heads out of this stifling drudgery and let your humanity breathe!

*SADIE:* What page is she on now?

*JOAN (closing the pamphlet):* Her own, I think.

*MOLLIE:* You'll see—it's not hard at all. We have an instinct for freedom!

*ROSE and SADIE laugh.*

*ROSE (to JOAN):* She just won't quit. Could you please tell her to stuff it?

*JOAN:* No, I like it. It reminds me of when I was alive. Back at Triangle.

*A beat. ROSE and MOLLIE exchange a glance.*

*ROSE (gravely):* You were at the Triangle factory?

*SADIE:* What? What happened?

*ROSE:* They had a strike. Then a few months later, they had a fire. Many people were killed.

*JOAN:* Everyone was killed.

*A beat.*

*MOLLIE (undaunted):* Then you know better than anyone the need for us to take action. To meet with the other shops and call a strike—

*ROSE:* But things are better now. Thanks to them.

*JOAN:* It's true. Jumping out of burning windows was a little more effective than the strike— but not much.

*SADIE:* I don't understand!

*JOAN:* Neither did we. We were inspired with WELL-BEING FOR ALL! You're right, Mollie, it was so simple. One day, we'd just had it; we all got up from our machines, and...walked right out! And before we knew it, 500 other shops were doing the same (*quiet awe*). There were *thousands* of us!

*JOAN:* They just tried to break us in other ways. They started bringing the replacements in *cars*! They put in a phonograph and opened the windows at lunchtime. We could see them up there dancing, peeling oranges, sipping tea. The best ones got prizes—fancy hats, fur coats...

*SADIE:* Now *that's* cruel.

*ROSE:* Like dangling steaks over the heads of the starving.

*JOAN:* Oh, it wasn't the clothes. No, no—it was the dancing! Well, imagine dancing here, or anywhere. Who ever has time enough?

*ROSE:* Or energy enough.

*JOAN:* No, none of us! And there they were above us, dancing at *work*, laughing at all of us below. We were envious for a minute, who wouldn't be? But pretty soon we all just laughed back.

*MOLLIE:* Because they were like puppets! The owners weren't using *you* any more—you'd come alive! (*to the others*): And then it doesn't matter when the police come at you with their clubs—

*JOAN (scoffs):* Well, what was a cracked head when we were already dying in that firetrap, with that oily air, the dim lights, and all the rats and roaches crawling in your skirts? (*a beat*).

*ROSE:* It's not so very different now.

*JOAN:* Exactly. I was beaten and arrested off the picket line by some thug just for not answering him. The judge who sentenced me gave me a lecture, said I was an immoral woman for walking the line. "You are on strike against God!" he shouted. "Then God had better sell to the Devil," I said, "because we're putting him out of business!"

*ROSE:* *You* said that?

*JOAN:* Yes, can you believe it? That alone was worth the three days in jail.

*SADIE:* So what happened? Did you win?

*JOAN (obviously):* No! Well, most of the shops got a little shorter hours, and a little more money. But our shop remained closed to out union. We'd demanded better fire escapes and sprinklers, but they still wouldn't even remove the oil barrels blocking the stairways. Instead, thanks to us the doors were locked all day to keep out the organizers.

*MOLLIE:* Owners never care whether their factories burn to the ground; it would cost them more to make the improvements. To them the human cost is nothing!

*JOAN (to MOLLIE, a shared joke):* The owners told one fire inspector, "Let 'em burn, they're a lot of cattle anyway." (*MOLLIE is silenced.*)

*ROSE:* We still don't have sprinklers.

*SADIE:* We've never even had a fire drill!

*JOAN:* No? Well, that won't do at all; it's against the law now, thanks to the corpses. Maybe we'll have one later, just for us. (*A beat; looks at SADIE, stops working*) Oh, poor Sadie— that's the face, girls, see it? Everyone had it when we saw that first window shattering to glitter. One moment we were laughing and singing—well, it was payday!—and the next, we were screaming. And in between, just that one soft, silent look of fear.

*ROSE:* Really... you're scaring the poor girl.

*JOAN:* Ghosts can't hurt you, dear. Well, not on purpose. Anyway, I'm not talking to Sadie.

*MOLLIE:* I'll take my seat back now.

*JOAN:* You will not. I'm fondly reminiscing. One grows to love these machines after a while, believe it or not—(*Joan places her hand on her machine.*)—once you grow out of your hatred for them. (*a beat.*) Put your hands on your machines, girls—feel that? (*they do, but recoil instantly from the heat.*) No, keep it there. (*JOAN holds hers in place.*) The air all around you felt like that, like the fire was inside you, just beneath your skin. (*gently removes her hand.*) It spread so fast! Flames started shooting up all around like fountains, right up through these machines; our work-baskets were exploding. We jumped for the exits, but the fire escapes and elevators were already crushed. The one stairwell we were allowed to use was blocked by smoke and fire, and of course, the other door was locked. Groups of us kept running back and forth, screaming like wildcats. Even me! Who had shown such poise during the strike. "We're putting God out of business!"

*ROSE:* Anyone would have reacted the same.

*JOAN:* People were throwing the slow ones out of the way, especially the little girls we used to hide from the inspectors—girls not much younger than Sadie.

*MOLLIE:* Leave her out of it.

*JOAN:* Compassion for the weak! Why didn't we think of that? We were stepping on the ones who had fainted as if they were sacks of cloth. But you had to keep running, if only to show that you weren't like those strange women who still hadn't even gotten up from their machines. I guess they were frozen with fear, but they seemed perfectly calm, like they were just waiting patiently for the foreman to come release them for the day. Maybe they believed that somehow everything would be all right, like our parents always told us, because things were different here—

*MOLLIE:* "In America, they don't let you burn."

*JOAN:* Right! They found them that night as charred skeletons, still bending over their machines.

*A pause.*

*SADIE:* So...how did you get out?

*JOAN:* I didn't. One time around the shop, I found myself by the windows where several people were standing like statues, except their legs were quivering. I started to get up there with them, and then something like a gust of wind blew me away from there as fast as I could go. Suddenly I came to a stop, and...I saw a bolt of lawn just sitting there on a table, all clean and white; it wasn't burning, it wasn't even hot. I grabbed it and started wrapping it around my body until only my eyes showed through a little crack. Then I ran down the narrow stairwell, right into the teeth of the flames, peeling off the burning lawn layer by layer. By the time I got down to the sixth floor I'd left most of it in ashes behind me. And when it was gone, all went dark. (*Near or behind THE BUG, a shadow puppetry sequence begins. Music/soundscape*). I woke up down below, lying on a sidewalk. They gave me milk and I threw up smoke. I looked up and saw all these bundles of cloth falling from the building. And I thought, Why are they saving their cloth and not the people? But then one of the bundles of cloth opened and I saw a pair of legs inside, and then another opened, and another. It was raining women—sometimes three and four at a time. They'd hit the ground, and just...stop. One of the cops who had clubbed us during the strike was standing right next to me, yelling "Don't jump, you crazy females! Don't jump!" His face was wet with tears. But you could see the flames licking at their heels. And then...this one girl came out on the ledge and inched away from the window. For a while, she stood there staring straight ahead as though she were looking at herself in a mirror, then very carefully she took off her hat and sent it sailing through the air. In the same way, she slowly opened her pay envelope and scattered the bills and coins like so many dead leaves and clumps of dirt. Then she tilted her head back and gazed into the mirror, and in that mirror was me. "Jump," I said. "Jump!"