

#4 - Josef, Fannie, Mollie

JOSEF STEIMER *is returning home after his first shift, sitting down on a beat-up couch, exhausted. The room is dim and cramped. MOLLIE is sitting across from him, eyeing him over the book.*

JOSEF (*looking at his watch; groans*): Just a little nap, then I go back. Wake me, Mollie.

MOLLIE: Papa, no—you've already done one shift. Standard Oil will not collapse just because you aren't there one night. Please, Papa, you're sick.

JOSEF: I'm not sick.

MOLLIE: You need your rest.

JOSEF: Rest doesn't pay the rent.

MOLLIE: We have enough. (*he scoffs.*) I'll work double. Or I'll do something else. (*gets up.*) I'll just go down and tell them—

JOSEF: No!

MOLLIE (*opening the door*): Just one night!

JOSEF: Mollie! Come back, or I get up right now. (*MOLLIE closes the door; FANNIE enters with a basket of clothes.*) One moment's rest I want, and you waste it with all this talk.

FANNIE: Let him rest, Mollie.

MOLLIE: That's what I'm trying to do.

FANNIE: I need you here.

MOLLIE *obediently goes over and sits down with her, grabs a pile of clothes to fold.*

FANNIE: These are for the boarders, so make them nice.

MOLLIE: They could do it themselves.

FANNIE: They pay us.

MOLLIE: They take advantage. You have six children and five boarders. And Papa. Twelve people to take care of all by yourself.

FANNIE: Little Josef helps now. (*pointed*): And you, now that you're studying at *home* again. (*MOLLIE turns away; FANNIE regrets her words.*) Whatever you can do, I'm happy.

MOLLIE: You're not happy. None of us are.

JOSEF (a sleepy echo): ...not happy?

FANNIE (hushing her): Mollie!

MOLLIE (more softly): Look at how thin and weary he is now. (*pointing, making her look.*) No look, Mother. Look!

FANNIE: I see it, Mollie, every day I see it.

MOLLIE: I've tried to be like you and just be quiet. But something's crying out in me, it just gets louder.

FANNIE: I know.

MOLLIE (dropping the clothes): Baskets of clothes! I want it all to stop!

FANNIE: I know.

MOLLIE (a beat): You do? (*FANNIE nods. MOLLIE resumes folding; gravely*): Then you'll understand. No matter what happens.

FANNIE: What? What's happened? (*A beat.*) Are you in trouble?

MOLLIE: No! No more babies! We've had enough misfortune in that way.

FANNIE (scolding, but relieved): Mollie! To talk of your brothers and sisters like that! They look up to you so—you're like their second mother!

MOLLIE: If only they didn't have to grow up and live like us. Already poor Josef wants to work. He's starting to understand we can't afford him.

FANNIE: Mollie!

MOLLIE: But it's the truth. You didn't want them either.

FANNIE: They came. It wasn't a choice.

MOLLIE: No! Nothing's a choice. And everything should be.

JOSEF (half-asleep): Was a good choice to come here... No one killing us.

FANNIE: Yes, Papa—now get some sleep. (*to MOLLIE, an urgent whisper*): But what do you mean “No matter what happens?” (*MOLLIE turns away*.) No, now *you* look. What are you thinking to do?

MOLLIE (distant despair): Nothing will stop unless I make it stop.

FANNIE: Mollie, you mustn’t even think of that!

MOLLIE (a beat): No, not *that*! How terrible that you could even think it—I mean that such a thing is possible.

FANNIE (busily working): It isn’t, it isn’t.

MOLLIE: Well, not now. Anyway, that’s not what I mean. I mean this crying out inside. Somehow it has to come out. I mean I have to really see it and feel it myself... (*frustrated*.) I don’t know what I mean.

A pause.

FANNIE: You could get married. (*MOLLIE groans*.) Yes, why not? You’re old enough! You need a family of your own / to take care of.

MOLLIE: No, no, *no*! It’s all too small. I mean something else, I mean life itself... (*a beat*): Do you remember that litter of kittens that were born under our doorstep?

FANNIE: In Donaevsky, yes. That was a terrible place. I don’t know what Papa was thinking / bringing us there.

MOLLIE (breaking in): There was one who was too small and couldn’t get to the mother like the others.

FANNIE: You tried to nurse him yourself—with cow’s milk!

MOLLIE: I didn’t know what else to do. *You* wouldn’t help.

FANNIE: It is the way of nature, Mollie. Even his own mother turned her back.

MOLLIE: Yes. You kept saying that.

FANNIE (defensive): I felt that was important, not to cry over every little thing—like I did when I was a girl. It made me foolish and silly— (*with MOLLIE, who is wearily reciting the familiar lesson*): — **a head full of dreams.** (*FANNIE alone*): Yes! You cut yourself, I gave you a bandage and turned away.

MOLLIE: And cried.

FANNIE (a beat): But it was good I did that. Look how good you work.

MOLLIE: Like a machine.

FANNIE: So I made you tough and now you are angry.

MOLLIE: No, no—that's not it at all. It was the kitten itself I was remembering. He was so tiny and frail, he looked more like a mouse. You could feel his bones poking through his skin. He'd lie there quivering, sucking my fingers; for a while he'd try to swallow some of the milk, then he'd stop and curl up as deep into my hand as he could go. But the strange part was that even after you would make me put him back with the others, even after you finally took him away—

FANNIE: I didn't want you to cry, I didn't want you to bury him!

MOLLIE: —even then I could still feel him, all day long, a tingling right in the center of my palm. I can still feel it now, if I really think about it. He was alive—that's all he was. But perfectly. (*a beat.*) That's what I want. I just want to be alive.

FANNIE: I can't help you with that.

MOLLIE: No.

A beat.

FANNIE: Having a family is the only way for us, Mollie. You're right—little ones are so helpless, they need you for everything.

MOLLIE: But what they really need we can't give them.

FANNIE: We give them life.

MOLLIE: A life in prison.

FANNIE: You don't know that. Maybe they have a better life. (*MOLLIE scoffs.*) Not now, but someday.

MOLLIE: Someday. You mean for David?

FANNIE: Or David's David.

MOLLIE (groans): It's a trap, this hoping, I'd rather die. A life without choices is no life at all.

FANNIE: You do have a choice, Mollie. Just make sure you do it well. Look for a man who can give you the freedom you want.

MOLLIE: The freedom I'm talking about / has nothing to do with marriage.

FANNIE: And this I can help you with.

MOLLIE: I will not sell my love!

FANNIE: What love? I only want that you be happy. Don't be the fool I was. Forget the ones with big ideas and no money. Those Bolsheviki are no good for you, Mollie.

MOLLIE: They're not Bolsheviks!

FANNIE: Shh. Papa must not hear.

JOSEF: What must Papa not hear?

MOLLIE: The Bolsheviks, Papa.

JOSEF: Ach. No good.

MOLLIE: The ones who killed the Czar and freed Russia from slavery.

JOSEF (scoffs): And now the Jews are having the Sabbath with Lenin.

MOLLIE: Maybe not. But it's better there now than it was.

JOSEF: You want to go back?

FANNIE: She doesn't, Papa.

MOLLIE: No. I want to bring Russia here!

JOSEF: Let it stay where it is. You don't remember Kishinev.

MOLLIE: Kishinev!

FANNIE: Josef, no. Get some rest.

JOSEF: What rest? Is impossible to rest with this noise. Bring Russia here! You don't remember, or you wouldn't talk so.

JOSEF speaks the following wearily, as though talking in his sleep—a story he's told many times. Meanwhile, he slowly rises, puts on his shoes, gathers up his little bundle for work. FANNIE continues to fold, emotionless. MOLLIE pities him, but turns away.

JOSEF: Bad enough the way they moved us from place to place like animals, but they had also to spread rumors about us, lies—said Jews killed Christian boys and used their blood for matzoh! Then they found that one boy stabbed, but it wasn't Jews who did it. It was only the excuse to beat and rob us. It was the end of Passover, the beginning of their Easter. Their Christ is supposed to be risen, but all they celebrate was more death. They came in the night like wolves. People dragged from their beds, butchered with knives—some have the spikes driven through their hands and feet, like to crucify them! Three days and nights it went on. The police did nothing to stop them, they even helped in the looting. When it was all over, their official report said *we* were to blame! More lies, and again they all believed! Because there is no justice in Russia. And after, there were many more such times; I saw the bodies piled, even girls like you. For nothing they all died. For nothing. (*End of Music and shadow puppetry sequence. JOSEF looks at his watch, groans.*) I go now. (*gets up.*) You don't remember. It's good we came.