

## 41. Lowell Factory Girls (1834)

*Marta and Ellie are heading for the bus stop after the last day of school and begin to discuss their summer plans. Little do they know that they will be visited by a figure from the past . . .*

Marta: Finally! I thought junior year would never end!

Ellie: *(takes a deep breath)* Freedom!

Marta: So now what do we do?

Ellie: I'm getting a job. My incredible video game collection and amazing outfits don't pay for themselves. Oh, plus college. I should probably save up for that since it will cost a million dollars a year by the time I graduate.

Marta: Where are you going to work?

Ellie: I'll cook burgers over at Pete's Grille.

Marta: *(gasps)* How could you work there?! Do you know how many times that place has gotten in trouble for having faulty equipment in the kitchen? They've had four health violations this year alone and I hear they make kids work illegal hours! Plus, they barely pay anything!!

Ellie: Hey, a job is a job. We should just take what we can get and live with it.

*Suddenly, the ghost of a strange, old woman appears.*

Marta and Ellie: *(together)* Who are you?!

Harriet: My name is Harriet Hanson Robinson! *(points at Ellie)* And who might you be?!

Ellie: *(frightened)* Ellie . . .

Harriet: Have you no idea who I am? Where I came from?

Marta: Lady, we run into angry old people like you on the bus every single day . . .

Harriet: *(interrupting)* Show some respect! I've traveled here from the past to talk some sense into your friend here. Did I just hear you say that you'll take a job even though you know you'll be mistreated?

Ellie: Hey, I need the money!

Harriet: I'm sure you do, but I didn't join my first labor strike as a child just so I could watch girls accept sub-standard working conditions almost 200 years later!

Marta: What are you talking about? Quit yelling at us and just tell us your story.

Harriet: It all happened in Lowell, Massachusetts, where one of the first factories in America was located. I started working at the Lowell Mill, which made thread for clothing, when I was ten years old. I guess about ten years earlier it was a decent place for girls to live and work, since it had a boarding house, too, but by the time I got there it was terrible.

Ellie: What was so bad about it?

Harriet: I shared a bedroom with five other women and we slept three to a bed! I started work at 5am and most of the time I wouldn't get done until 7:30pm, with only two short breaks for lunch and dinner!

Marta: That's an eternity! What was the work like?

Harriet: It was excruciating. I spent the whole day rushing around from spindle to spindle trying to keep up. The managers kept adding more equipment, but would barely hire any more girls to help keep up. Plus, they had this idea that humidity kept the cotton threads from breaking so they would nail all of the windows shut to trap the heat in.

Ellie: I can't believe they could do that. Did they at least pay you a decent wage?

Harriet: They hired girls like me precisely so they didn't have to! The owners could get away with paying women less than men for the same work.

Marta: I would never put up with that! Why did you stay?

Harriet: Well, we didn't have a lot of options, but we did have one weapon: organizing! When the owners announced they were going to cut our pay by 15% in 1834, the Lowell Factory Girls went on strike and demanded that we get to keep our usual pay!

Ellie: Did the owners give in?

Harriet: Sadly, no. The newspapers and the clergymen criticized us relentlessly until we gave up. We went back to work for less pay and the leaders were fired. But we tried again in 1836 when they announced they were going to increase our rates to stay at the boarding house! We had twice as many workers join us that time!

Marta: That must have showed them!

Harriet: *(sighs)* No, we failed again. Our next move was to try to get the state government to pass a law for a ten-hour workday. That didn't work, either.

Ellie: Jeez. If nothing you girls tried actually worked, then why are you here yelling at me?

Harriet: Because we were part of a movement! Workers would no longer just sit and take whatever the owners would give us. We were subjected to horrible working conditions, long hours, little pay, and they were always watching everything we did in that boarding house! Not to mention the fact that I started working full-time when I was 11 years old!! It may have taken awhile, but things changed. You benefit from our lifetimes of fighting.

Marta: Yeah, I guess you're right. Most of us don't have to worry about things like that these days.

Harriet: I know, but your friend here seems content to screw all of that up by working for a miser in that disgusting hamburger place!

Ellie: Alright! Alright! I'll keep looking!

Harriet: Self-respect girl. That's what it's all about. OK then, off I go! A girl in Reno just said that voting is stupid and someone needs to give her a good tongue-lashing.

*Harriet vanishes, leaving Ellie and Marta to ponder what they just heard.*

Marta: I suggest we remember everything we just heard.

Ellie: And I suggest we never tell anyone that we got a history lesson from a time-traveling old woman at a city bus stop.

Marta: Agreed.