Navjot Hansra

Ms. Taiz and Ms. Bell

English 10, Period 6/7

November 15, 2012

Jemma Collins: Match Girl

Coating the end of the matchstick with the chalk-white, powdery chemical was a simple task… if it were not for the poisonous fumes that it gave off. Jemma has already started to feel the effect of the chemical on her own face. It gave her painful shocks in her jaw, almost as if someone were stabbing her mouth with a hot knife.

She looked to her right at Emma, an older girl that sometimes gave Jemma a piece of brown bread when she had nothing to eat. Jemma knew Emma would get phossy jaw like countless other match girls working at the factory, but she did not know that the disease would completely change Emma’s beautiful face. Instead of her flawless porcelain skin, her face had a deep yellow tint. Her teeth had started to rot so bits of them would fall out when she opened her mouth, and her hair had started to fall out of her thick blond mane. Worst of all, her jaw gave off a sickening green glow. Patches of her skin had turned ashy and black, giving off a foul smelling pus that trickled down her cheek when Emma looked down.

*That is my future. I know it in my mind, but my heart hopes that it may not be true... please, Lord, do not make me suffer this injustice!*

As much as she tried to convince herself, though, the more painful Jemma’s jaw got. She knew that it was inevitable. If Ann - her sixteen-year-old sister who could lift their mother’s biggest pots and patch up their apartment’s giant leaks - was home dying of phossy jaw, why would Jemma be any exception?

She cannot forget her older sister’s words when Ann first told her that she had phossy jaw. It had been a difficult day, with Ann bringing home only a fraction of her pay - barely enough to pay for a decent supper. Jemma had come home ten minutes earlier than her sister and had planned to surprise Ann when she walked up the stairs to their apartment. Ready to pounce on her sister and give her a huge hug, Jemma froze in her steps when she saw tears falling down Ann’s cheeks. “What is the matter, Ann?” Jemma said. “Jem, you know what the matter is!” Anne cried, sobbing harder than Jemma had ever seen her do, even when their father had died. “You cannot know for sure, Ann? What if your pain is simply temporary, perhaps from the cold?” Jemma had replied, even though she knew the truth. The Jensons, the other family who lived with them in their cramped home, had found out that their daughter Lizzy had gotten phossy jaw only two weeks ago. Ann looked just like Lizzy now. “No, Jem, I am certain. And it is too late to prevent it! Lizzy has it too, Jemma!” Ann exclaimed, “I remember when she told her family the news. And my cheek is turning green, for heaven’s sake!”

Jemma still shivers when she hears her sister’s crying. That had been a month ago. Today, Ann had stayed at home. Jemma knew that her sister didn’t have a lot of time left, but it pained her to think about going home and finding her liveless body. Ann was a pretty girl, with raven hair and green eyes just like Jemma. They had a lot in common. Both of them were tempermental and rebellious, just like their father had been. Jemma remembers the time their mother had forced them to wear matching brown dresses when she was six and Ann was eight. They hated the dull color, so they had both broken the buttons off their collars and ripped the dresses off, running around their home in their petticoats while their mother laughed at them. *Mother.* Jemma and Ann loved their mother. She was the reason they both woke up in the morning ready to work at the Bryant & May match factory, even though they dreaded the place and often thought about burning it down. Their mother was hard-working and caring, but after their father’s death two years back, she needed the extra money from her daughters’ jobs.

And that’s why Jemma didn’t complain. She kept dipping each match, one after the other, in the chemical, knowing that her mother and dying sister depended on her. Jemma didn’t know how much longer she could go on though. The phossy jaw made her entire body feel like shutting down. She needed a break, but her terrible manager, Mr. Brown, would probably kill her if she did. Last week, she had dropped a match because of her jaw’s shocking pain, and Mr. Brown had shouted at her, saying “You lazy, senseless wench! That match is coming out of your pay!” He had docked her measly pay of 4 shillings to 2, and then stormed off, yelling “I want no more mistakes! I have a belt and I will not hesitate to use it on any of you!”

Since their last break had been three hours ago, they would probably be dismissed in an hour. Mr. Brown usually kept them longer, though, taking advantage of the fact that they didn’t have watches. Jemma looked around the gray walls of the factory. There were ten other girls at her table, including Emma. They were all looking down at their matches, though, probably thinking about they would be allowed to go home too. Jemma was willing to take the risk. She put down the match she was on and folded her hands together in front of her, leaning her body against the cool surface of the table so she did not have to support her body. She relished in the moment, and her jaw suddenly did not hurt as bad. But then she heard footsteps behind her. She recognized the sound from whenever a girl made a mistake in the factory. It was Ms. Brown.

Jemma turned around, dreading what she would see. Mr. Brown’s face was redder than she had ever seen. His chest was heaving up and down, and his mouth was twisted with disgust and anger. Then Jemma saw his hand. It held his leather belt, the weapon that he had used on innocent girls that just needed a break from working ten hours a day. He hated laziness or disobience. About a year ago, a girl had sat down, thinking her pay would be the only things cut. She didn’t realize that Mr. Brown wasn’t above hurting someone to make them work. And now, Jemma is in her situation. “Why have you stop working, Collins?” said Mr. Brown, dragging each word out and incorporating his anger into each syllable. Jemma replied, shaking with fear, “I- I’m sorry, Mr. Brown, sir. I- I had needed a second to rest. You see, my jaw-” His belt whipped across her chest, burning her skin and making her jaw hurt more than ever. She screamed out in pain, closing her eyes and praying that he won’t hit again. She could feel the blood on her skin, and Mr. Brown’s professional yet piercing words. “Ms. Collins, you will not be paid for your laziness. I will not have a girl like *you* slowing my factory’s work! You and your good-for-nothing sister are useless, senseless, and lazy! Wenches, both of you!”

That did it. Jemma could take the abuse, ignore her jaw, and bear the burn that the belt had given her. She cound not, however, live while someone insulted her sister. Not Ann, who never hurt anyone in her life and always put her family before herself. Jemma looked Mr. Brown in the eye and said the nicest thing she could right now: “I quit.”

Jemma never felt better to rebel before. She turned her back on him, not stopping to see what his expression was. She looked in front of her. She saw the girls with their mouths wide open. She saw the dirty walls and dirty floor, crowded with metal tables. The factory was silent, but Jemma was sure the girls would clap if they had nothing to lose. She breathed in the rusty, smelly air one last time before walking out.

She felt proud. She never hurt someone before, and she was glad she didn’t try that night. She quit. Jemma Collins, 14-year-old, quit. She felt happy for a moment to have left that prison she called “work”. She was free.

Then she stopped. She realized what she had done in her anger at Mr. Brown. She ran home as fast as her legs would take her. She slammed open the door to her home and saw what she had dreaded along. Her mother was crying over her sister’s body. Ann was dead. Jemma collapsed on the floor, listening to her mother’s screams. She no longer had a sister. She no longer had a job. How was she supposed to take care of herself and her mother? They had barely any money, and Jemma had just left the only thing that kept the family barely going. She couldn’t go back – not after what she said. She couldn’t go to Ann – she was dead. Jemma inched her way to her mother, taking her into her arms and sobbing into her only family’s neck.