

Third Prize
Coiled
by Jessica Joy

Rosemary Preston shaved her head the day after the witch trials ended and not long after she seduced the Witchfinder General. It is a little-known fact that a witch's powers are considerably reduced the longer she grows her hair.

It had been a difficult year. The town had gone mad with finger-pointing and mudslinging, often in her direction.

Rosemary kept her head. She hid her herbs and potions, put a rabbit stew in her cauldron, and ushered Smutteridge into the forest to fend for himself. Smutteridge had sulked under a stone long after he was invited back indoors.

Candlelight danced in the eaves. Rosemary laid her lengths of hair along the table. The flame flickered across the paler shafts. An hour in the same room as the Witchfinder General's halitosis was enough to turn anyone grey. Rosemary's crowning glory was not the mess of hair laid out in front of her, but her perfectly smooth skull and the beautiful brain therein.

She sat and plaited the hair she had saved. Single strands caught on her rough callouses and snagged on split skin, as she slipped section over section. She added in more hair to lengthen the braid. Flick, flick, flick.

When she was finished, she pulled a wicker basket down from the beam overhead, shooing out the resident spider. She dropped the hair into the basket in a woven coil and replaced the lid.

After Rosemary had finished with the Witchfinder General, she'd left him snoring and snuffling on his pristine pillows while she sewed her hair, in a tiny spiral, under the greasy collar of his favourite coat. Tack, tack, tack.

Charcoal clouds crossed over the moon and bathed her room in velvet darkness. The midnight breeze rattled the shutters. It made the candle gutter and the fire crackle under the bubbling pot.

Rosemary massaged her freshly shorn head and inhaled the fumes of earthy sage. Outside, Smutteridge trilled his toad melody.

She raised her hands, closed her eyes, and began to chant. The wicker basket wobbled. With a tingle in her temples, she felt the pull of her hairs embedded in the General's collar. The basket moved. She lifted the lid and hissed a singsong spell. The plaited hair rose out of the basket, a King Cobra of auburns and browns. Rosemary invoked the hairs on the jacket to do the same. The snake hair in front of her wound itself round and round.

In his chambers, the hairs on the jacket slithered over floorboards to the General's bed. They crept under the sheet and wound around fleshy limbs, then coiled round the General's neck. Rosemary whispered her charm and urged the cobra hair to twist on itself, tighter and tighter. She felt the smaller hair-snake mimic the movements as they disappeared into the folds of his skin.

The Witchfinder General had hanged so many innocents; several were her sisters. He would pay now for his bigotry.

Tonight, the General's eyes would bulge, and he would clutch at his throat with privileged fingers, powerless to stop the strangulation. The General would know the agony and despair her sisters had known. Crack, crack, crack.

Author Bio: Jess has stories in several anthologies: *With Our Eyes Open: Book a Break Anthology 2017*, Waterloo Festival's *Transforming Being*, *The Rabbit Hole 2* (The Writers Co-op), and others produced by writing groups. Jess has been runner-up and winner in Faber Academy's QuickFic competition.