

Title (up to 20 words) - The Witching Hour

Strapline (up to 40 words) - A witch in the witch trials; how can she hope to survive?

Copy (between 900 and 1000 words) -

“I’m never allowed to help! Her spells are always ‘too advanced’ or ‘too dangerous’, and I’m always ‘too young’. I’m fifteen! It’s not fair, all I want to do is help!”

I feel Barnabus, my cat, enter into my mind, his soothing energy counteracting my frustration as our minds entwine. Usually I love this part of witchcraft, but right now I don’t want to calm down; his influence over my emotions only angers me further. I push his stupid fluffy body off my lap and I’m alone in my mind once more.

Immediately my anger dissipates and Barnabus’s confused mews wrench at my heart.

“Sorry, Barnabus. I shouldn’t have taken it out on you.” I sigh and stand up. “Come on, let’s go for a walk.”

We walk the streets in silence. Comfortable silence, though, not awkward; I can feel myself calming down with every step. I slip into the rhythm of it – right, left, right, left...

Suddenly I’m wrenched back to reality by people whispering. All I hear is a name: “Matthew Hopkins”. The name is enough for me to start panicking – the Witchfinder General! He couldn’t be coming here! What if he found my mother and me?

“Go, Barnabus!” He dashes away in a streak of black; he understands that a familiar would cause the death of us all. I run too, but not away – I run home as fast as possible, my thoughts racing even faster. I have to warn my mother!

I burst through the door, gasping “Hopkins!” again and again. She understands immediately, freezing for a second, eyes wide with shock and fear. Then she launches into action, gathering everything – the books, the herbs, everything – and shoving it

under the floorboards. Together we heave the cauldron outside and cover it in leaves as best we can, casting a quick illusion spell to disguise it further. Not bad for a rushed job!

A scream erupts from outside, and instantly we know he's arrived. Dreading what we'll see, we go outside to join the others.

At first all we see is people. The entire town must be here! Then our eyes are drawn to him. Hopkins. In his top hat, cape and flamboyant trousers – his clothes were a clear display of his wealth. Then his goons, holding a rope, and at the end of the rope...

A body.

Anne. My mother's friend. She wasn't a witch, she was innocent – what is Hopkins doing? Another woman was brought up: Joan. Then another. Then another. All innocent.

None of these women are witches! What is he doing?

Soon they reach me, grabbing me roughly and searching all over, and my face burns with humiliation. My relief is immense when they move on from me – but also my confusion. I'm a witch and yet they just leave me? That seems too good to be true.

Turns out I'm right: they search my mother and find a birthmark on her arm. Suddenly all attention is on her. Hopkins saunters over, irritatingly cocky, and pulls out a wicked-looking needle with a wooden handle, a few inches long, jabbing it into her arm without hesitation. She doesn't even wince. He seems satisfied by this and drags her away from me towards the platform. No! I refuse to let go of her, but they're stronger than me and pull me back; I can do nothing as my mother dies before my eyes. Before everyone's eyes.

My vision blurs as tears stream down my cheeks. Sobs wrack my body and I can barely stand; suddenly I rely on the men holding me to remain upright. I hardly notice as I'm dragged away towards the river.

When we reach the bank the primal part of my brain fills me with fear as I realise what they are doing. I'm going to be dunked in the river. I'll either float (and they'll kill me for witchcraft) or I'll drown. Either way I die! Desperately I strain against the men holding me but I can do nothing as they bind my hands and feet and throw me into the river.

Suddenly I'm underwater, the light rippling above my head, so close but unreachable. I can't breathe. I'm going to drown! My vision darkens, and I open my mouth to take a breath...

And breathe in air as my head breaks the surface of the water. I'm dragged to the edge by the same men that threw me in, clearly satisfied that I'm not a witch. My back arches as I cough up what feels like half the river, and my lungs burn.

By the time I sit up Hopkins and his lackeys have gone and the town is at peace once more. I don't want to look towards the gallows, but I have to know. How many have died?

I count quickly, doing my best not to look at any of their faces. Nineteen. Nineteen people dead. My mother was the only witch in the town excluding me, so eighteen 'normal' people had died for no reason.

Disgusted, I turn away. As I do, my hand knocks against something and I pick it up, intrigued. It's Hopkins' needle. Furiously I jab it into the earth. Why did he have to come here? He ruined everything!

Suddenly I notice that there's no hole where I'd stabbed, only a dent where the handle had hit. Curious, I press it into my finger and the needle slides back into the handle. It's rigged! My mother had died for a conman!

A fresh wave of grief washes over me with this realisation. I'm alone for no reason. I'm alone. I'm alone.

*You're not alone.* Barnabus. He's back, and I've never been so grateful for his presence. Maybe I'm not alone after all.

"What do we do now, Barnabus? We're a girl and a cat. What can we do?"

*He's still out there. He'll kill more people.*

"I know."

*So why don't we reach him first?*

Why don't we reach him first?