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Washed Away

“Happy Halloween!” Hazel Pelton screamed out the window as the brisk, frigid air blew past her face and a few red leaves practically floated just outside her reach on the spookiest morning of the year. She dashed downstairs and sat down at the kitchen table for breakfast.

“Oh, I just can’t wait for trick-or-treating tonight!” she told her mother, who was eating a bowl of soggy oatmeal next to Hazel. “Can I wear my costume all day today instead of changing into it later? Please?”

“Well, I suppose so,” replied her mother. “But first finish your eggs.” After she had cleaned her plate, Hazel raced to her bedroom to change as she heard her mother call sharply, “Hazel, don’t run!”

“Whatever,” Hazel muttered to herself. She got to her room and took the costume off its hanger. She held it up to herself in front of the mirror and squealed with delight, “It’s wonderful!” She carefully pulled on the orange and black striped stockings. Next the dress. Then the black shoes. And finally, the crooked, pointy hat.

“Look, mom,” she exclaimed when she had gotten back to the kitchen, “I’m a witch!”

The day went on as it always does. Hazel ran with her broomstick, pretending to ride it. Then she ate lunch. Then she rode some more. It had seemed like a pretty ordinary day so far, but Hazel knew it would become thrilling when trick-or-treating began. Fairly soon, it was time. Hazel picked up her candy bag and went to say goodbye to her mother.

“Now be careful,” her mother ordered sternly. “Look both ways before you cross the street and -”

“Mom, I’ll be completely fine,” Hazel interrupted. “Quit your worrying. Adieu, Mother!”

“Bye, sweetie,” her mother said. “Remember, don’t talk to -” Hazel had already skipped outside, slamming the door in her mother’s face.

“My mother,” Hazel thought to herself, “she’s always concerned about me getting run over by a car or kidnapped or something. What’s to worry about? I’m eleven years old. I can handle myself.”

Then she hurried off. She had only been walking for a few minutes when Hazel came to a fantastic painting on the window of The Legend, one of Hazel’s favorite restaurants.

“This is amazing!” she cried out in awe. “All the window paintings for the contest are exquisite, but this one is the best! Whoever created it is obviously a professional artist. I think I might’ve seen this one last year, though. But the painting is so realistic, it looks like I could just jump right into it!”

She went to every house and received scrumptious treats from each. After a while, a girl about her age who was also dressed as a witch, although her costume looked a bit small on her, approached Hazel.

“Hello there!” the girl called out happily. “May I trick-or-treat with you?”

“Of course,” Hazel answered. “My name’s Hazel Pelton. Who are you?”

“I’m Bernadette,” the girl replied. “It’s nice to meet you.” They soon became good friends and were having the time of their lives trick-or-treating. “I love your witch costume!” Hazel told Bernadette admiringly.

“Thank you, you’re so thoughtful,” Bernadette said back. “I like your disguise too!”

They had been trick-or-treating for a long time and by now it was about eleven o’clock at night. The girls decided they had gotten enough candy and to ride their broomsticks home. They

were almost to Hazel's new favorite painting when she asked Bernadette, "So, do you live nearby?"

"In a way," Bernadette said in response.

They had gotten to the window painting and Bernadette slowly took hold of Hazel's arm.

"Hazel, let me tell you a story. Exactly two years ago, I was out trick-or-treating with my friends. In fact, I'm wearing the same clothes I had on then. That's why they appear small on me. Anyway, we were having a splendid time together. We were all standing right here, counting to see who got the most candy. Then, suddenly, I felt two hands on my back, and in the blink of an eye, I was thrown into this very painting," she said as she pointed to the window painting Hazel loved so much.

The last thing I heard was myself screaming," she continued. "But once I was in the painting, I couldn't scream anymore. My voice just didn't work. I couldn't see or hear either. The worst part though was that I completely lost the ability to move. It was terrible. I could do only one thing - think. I counted the days so I wouldn't lose track of how old I was. I tried every day to escape. And one day," she added with a small smile, "I did. It turns out I had been in the painting for precisely one year. That meant it was Halloween. I couldn't believe it! I ran home to see my family. But when I got there..." she hesitated and Hazel could see tears in her eyes. "The house was in ruins! I could tell that it had burned down. I sat on the remains of the porch step and cried my eyes out." Bernadette stopped for a moment and looked down.

"After sobbing for hours, I decided there wasn't much hope in searching for my family," she said after she had pulled herself together. "I found some money on the street, so I used it to eat dinner at Jockamo's. I began to look for shelter to stay the night, but it was getting late and I started to feel strange, like I was being pulled somewhere. I somehow couldn't stop myself from walking towards the painting. I felt I was being controlled. I tried to fight against it, but doing so

was impossible. I was slowly pulled back into the painting. The whole cycle started over. So this time, instead of trying to jump out of the painting every day, I came up with a plan to escape for good on Halloween next year. I would find a replacement, someone who looked like me, so no one would notice I changed it. I needed a witch, or at least someone who was dressed like one.” Bernadette began to tremble. “After all, it’s supposed to be a painting of a witch,” she continued, her voice shaking now.

Hazel ventured to look up at the window and to her horror, there was no witch. “And how hard could it be to find a witch on Halloween?” Bernadette went on. “And now I’ve finally found the one.”

“Hey, I thought we were friends!” Hazel shouted angrily, suddenly realizing what Bernadette was about to do.

“We were,” Bernadette said quietly. “I’m so sorry Hazel. I am not a villain but a victim. The only way to survive is through the real witch. Yes, it was darkness when in the painting, but when the witch came to repaint me, I could see her. I could hear her speak too. She moved me by repainting me in different positions. The witch is the artist of the painting and therefore can change your appearance whenever she likes. This also means she can wash you away. Outside of finding a replacement on Halloween, your only chance of surviving is to hope to be repainted every year. Good luck, my friend.”

Immediately, Bernadette seized Hazel and threw her into the painting. The next thing Hazel saw was an old woman surrounded by darkness, who had a bucket of water which she poured onto the painting, slowly wiping Hazel from the glass and into nothing.