

The Creeping Costume

There are a lot of miracles in this world. Medicine, electricity, ice cream sandwiches. But by far the most miraculous miracle ever was a 100% test score in Ms. B's 8th grade social studies class. It was a miracle all 8th grade students at Rockport Junior High prayed for. One of the many hopefuls was Kelsie Jackson.

Third row, two seats back from the front, was Kelsie. Or rather, a bundle of panic disguised as Kelsie. She sat in a blue chair, the name of its previous occupant scratched in Sharpie on the bottom left corner. A fresh white paper lay innocently on the wood-toned, pencil-graffitied desk. Who knew that a tiny sliver of a tree, so easy to rip and crumple, could be so menacing?

Kelsie brushed her thumbnail against her cheek, her high top sneaker releasing the tiniest, frustrated *ta-tap*. She squeezed the pencil in her hand, staring at the questions on the paper relentlessly. Just simple words she couldn't find the meaning to. Black blotches of ink that were swallowed up like a sour medicine, and spat right back out again, the horrible taste of advanced geography sticking in her throat.

Kelsie tucked a loose strand of strawberry hair behind her ear. She rested her elbows, swaddled in a peach sweatshirt, on the sill of the window she sat next to. She stared wistfully at the purple mountains rising just past the buildings, wishing she could be outside, feeling the cold October wind twist across her face and whisper its joy in her ear.

It was the last period of the day, and nearly all the students, like Kelsie, just slumped in their chairs, eyes straying to the beautiful fall day beckoning them through the window. Ms. Bell soon looked up from her spot at her desk and realized this. So with a sigh, she rose from her chair and spoke in her *you-people-are-completely-hopeless* voice.

"As it seems all of you contain the attention span of a goldfish, I suppose we'll have to finish this test tomorrow," she sighed. "Place your papers up front and return to your seats, please."

There was a lazy shuffling as students rose from their stupor and returned their untouched tests to the front table.

"Now, before you leave, I have an important announcement to make," Ms. Bell said in a bored tone, implying she considered the announcement anything *but* important. "The school is holding a costume contest for Halloween."

Backs straightened, eyes opened, and the air buzzed with electric excitement.

“The costumes must be done by October 28. They should be of an original design, please no store-bought costumes. This is a contest to show your creativity,” Ms. Bell read in monotone, squeezing through the tight aisles of desks, passing out flyers. “Costumes must be school appropriate. No fake or real weapons, blood, or other unnecessary depictions of gore,” Ms. Bell finished to an outburst of angry complaints and groans.

Kelsie slid her fingers out from their curled position in her sleeve to accept the flyer from Ms. Bell. But before she could get a closer look, the bell rang. A chorus of “finally” rose from the class, and the kids cleared the room faster than if there had been a toxic gas leak.

Kelsie left the classroom and joined the after-school hallway stampede, a relief that only the end of school could bring rushing through the air. She squeezed through the mush of bodies to her locker, twisting the lock and shoving her books into her bag. Then she settled back into the current of students flooding out the front doors, thirsty for the brush of cool autumn air against their skin.

She found her friend Peyton sitting on a bench outside, attempting to shove her enormous math binder into her poor, overstuffed Cotopaxi backpack. Out of breath, Peyton swung her curtain of bouncy blonde curls out of her face, spotting Kelsie.

“Hey Kel,” Peyton panted, giving one last shove before swinging the 800 pound backpack over her shoulder.

“I don’t even know how you walk with that on,” Kelsie said, shaking her head as the girls headed home. She nudged a rock out of a crack in the sidewalk with her toe, kicking it along as the girls walked.

“So, are you entering the costume contest?” Peyton asked, fishing a crumpling flyer out of her crammed backpack. *Click. Click. Click.* The rock skipped across the sidewalk. Kelsie then realized she was still holding her own flyer, crushed in her fist. She extracted the wrinkled paper and studied it.

“Well, it does look pretty fun,” she agreed. “Maybe I will.”

Peyton brandished her flyer and began to read in a silly English accent.

“Hear ye, hear ye! Rockport Junior High is most pleased to announce a regal contest of costumes! All lords and ladies of Rockport are invited to participate. The fabulous judging of costumes will be held in the royal auditorium on the twenty-eighth of October. Please express your creativity in these costumes, and make sure they are of original design. Any citizen who presents a store-bought costume will hereby be executed (just kidding on that one, but please no store-bought costumes!). Have fun crafting! The best costume will be awarded a \$50 cash prize!”

The girls stopped at a crosswalk. Peyton looked up, eyebrows creased. “The twenty-eighth? That’s this Friday!”

“Well, we’ll just have to make our costumes tonight then,” Kelsie commented, looking both ways and walking across,

Peyton turned excitedly to Kelsie. “Does that mean you’re in?!”

Kelsie looked into Peyton’s animated, freckled face, blonde curls bouncing around her face. It was hard not to give in to her beaming smile. Kelsie scanned over the flyer again. “I suppose,” she sighed. Peyton gave a little happy hop and squealed. “You need to work on that english accent though,” Kelsie added.

The girls chatted about their costume ideas on the walk home. Despite her unenthusiastic demeanor, plans for her outfit were already racing through Kelsie’s head, her excitement mounting.

The girls parted ways at Peyton’s house, both eager to start on their costumes. Peyton dashed inside to get started and Kelsie took off down the block, determined to win.

Her toes barely touched the ground as she flew up the driveway and banged through the screen door. She tumbled into the warm, lemony-toned kitchen, the scent of butter and sugar wafting through the air.

She dropped her backpack, kicked off her shoes, and raced through the kitchen, with a quick hug for her mom and a kiss for her frosting-faced little sister (evidently they had been baking cinnamon rolls). She slid down the oak-paneled hallway in her socks, skidding to a stop in front of her room. She plopped down on her rainbow rug, pulled a notebook from her bag, and got to work.

For the rest of the afternoon, Kelsie zig-zagged through the house, grabbing odds and ends to create her costume with. Old clothing, magic markers, beads, a whole bunch of tape, and of course some glitter, because EVERYTHING is better with glitter.

Once she had gathered her materials, Kelsie sat criss-cross-applesauce on her rug, her laptop open to spider costumes on Pinterest as ideas. After some studying, Kelsie started on her costume. She had decided on becoming a spectacular spider for the contest!

She took an old black fuzzy sweater and shimmied into it, stuffing the front and back with two small pillows to appear rounder. She took a dusty black pool noodle she had found in the garage and cut it up to make twelve small pieces. She attached three of them together with black wire and some black-painted wooden dowels. She poked the dowels and wire through the

sweater, securing it with tape and some stitching. She did this four times total, so she had four bouncy legs sticking out of her sweater.

Next, she took a black bucket hat and pinned a fluffy black boa around the rim. She sewed eight white pom-poms onto the hat for milky, spooky eyes, and plopped the masterpiece onto her head.

For the finishing touch, she slipped on some black stretchy pants and a pair of black Converse. Ta-da! Her costume was complete, and she looked fabulous!

Later that night, Kelsie lay in bed, staring at her beautiful spider costume, laid out on her desk table. A little bubble of pride and confidence floated inside her. Friday couldn't come fast enough.

Kelsie turned over to turn off her lamp and saw a blur of black out of the corner of her eye. She whipped back to face her costume. One of the legs was dangling off the table. Had it been like that before? She leaned over to adjust it and studied it for a moment. Then she quickly switched off the light and buried her face in her pillow before she could think too much about it. Still, as she let her mind wander into a dreamy daze, she couldn't help hearing a slithering whisper brush across the floor as her eyelids dropped over her eyes.

The days leading up to the contest, Kelsie was jittery with nerves. She was pretty confident with her costume, but a swirl of doubt churned in her stomach, creating a feeling she couldn't quite find words for, although she somewhat liked it.

Then finally, Friday morning rolled around shrouded in a typical October morning mist. The thin wisps of fog threading through the air did create a spooky atmosphere for the after school costume contest.

Kelsie and Peyton arrived at school early to place their costumes in the girls locker room, as instructed. Many others were there too, and the air buzzed with anticipation for the contest.

Kelsie spent the classes leading up to the contest dreaming of a first place prize. The earlier incident was pushed out of her mind by the overwhelming, nervous excitement she felt. During her final class of the day, social studies, Kelsie checked the clock every few seconds. Ms. B's class seemed to drag on for hours.

Kelsie had never been more excited to hear the glorious ring of the bell. She practically leapt from her seat and joined the throng of students pressing to get out, bouncing on the tips of her toes in eagerness. She plowed through the mob of students gumming up the halls, slipping into the girl's gym lockers, where the girls had been told to store their costumes.

Oddly, no one was there. A chill seemed to spread through the room. Kelsie was painfully aware of the echoing tap of her shoes on the reflecting cold tile. *Drip. Drip. Drip.* A leaky sink broke the tense silence. A light flickered. The costumes lined up against the walls looked so creepy. They were just shells, hollow and sagging without a body to fill them.

Heart fluttering for a reason Kelsie couldn't quite place, she walked slowly down the rows of lonely costumes, feet speeding up as she went, breaths quick and sudden. She wanted out of this dim, empty locker, a space too big, too carefully quiet for one person. So where were the others?

A black lump lay at the end of the row, a tangle of fabric and spidery appendages, not hung quite as it was before. Kelsie kept going. Faster, faster, she was nearly running now.

And then she was in front of it. She stopped, heart trembling.

The lump didn't move.

The welcome rush of warm calm spread into her. It was okay, it was just a costume. It wasn't alive. It couldn't be. She began to turn away when she caught something in the cracked bathroom mirror. A glimmer of movement behind her. She started to whip around -

Six hairy legs grabbed her from behind.

The End

By Noelle Thackeray