

Extract from 'The Witches' by Roald Dahl



I myself had two separate encounters with witches before I was eight years old. From the first I escaped unharmed, but on the second occasion I was not so lucky. Things happened to me that will probably make you scream when you read about them. That can't be helped. The truth must be told. The fact that I am still here and able to speak to you (however peculiar I may look) is due entirely to my wonderful grandmother.

My grandmother was Norwegian. The Norwegians know all about witches, for Norway, with its black forests and icy mountains, is where the first witches came from. My father and my mother were also Norwegian, but because my father had a business in England, I had been born there and had lived there and had started going to an English school. Twice a year, at Christmas and in the summer, we went back to Norway to visit my grandmother. This old lady, as far as I could gather, was just about the only surviving relative we had on either side of our family. She was my mother's mother and I absolutely adored her. When she and I were together we spoke in either Norwegian or in English. It didn't matter which. We were equally fluent in both languages, and I have to admit that I felt closer to her than to my mother.

Soon after my seventh birthday, my parents took me as usual to spend Christmas with my grandmother in Norway. And it was over there, while my father and mother and I were driving in icy weather just north of Oslo, that our car skidded off the road and went tumbling down into a rocky ravine. My parents were killed. I was firmly strapped into the back seat and received only a cut on the forehead.

I won't go into the horrors of that terrible afternoon. I still get the shivers when I think about it. I finished up, of course, back in my grandmother's house with her arms around me tight and both of us crying the whole night long.

'What are we going to do now?' I asked her through the tears.

'You will stay here with me,' she said, 'and I will look after you.'

'Aren't I going back to England?'

'No,' she said. 'I could never do that. Heaven shall take my soul, but Norway shall keep my bones.'

The very next day, in order that we might both try to forget our great sadness, my grandmother started telling me stories. She was a wonderful story-teller and I was enthralled by everything she told me. But I didn't become really excited until she got on to the subject of witches. She was apparently a great expert on these creatures and she made it very clear to me that her witch stories, unlike most of the others, were not imaginary tales. They were all true. They were the gospel truth. They were history. Everything she was telling me about witches had actually happened and I had better believe it. What was worse, what was far, far worse, was that witches were still with us. They were all around us and I had better believe that, too.

'Are you really being truthful, Grandmamma? Really and truly truthful?'

'My darling,' she said, 'you won't last long in this world if you don't know how to spot a witch when you see one.'

'But you told me that witches look like ordinary women, Grandmamma. So how can I spot them?'

'You must listen to me,' my grandmother said. 'You must remember everything I tell you. After that, all you can do is cross your heart and pray to heaven and hope for the best.'



We were in the big living-room of her house in Oslo and I was ready for bed. The curtains were never drawn in that house, and through the windows I could see huge snowflakes falling slowly on to an outside world that was as black as tar. My grandmother was tremendously old and wrinkled, with a massive wide body which was smothered in grey lace. She sat there majestic in her armchair, filling every inch of it. Not even a mouse could have squeezed in to sit beside her. I myself, just seven years old, was crouched on the floor at her feet, wearing pyjamas, dressing-gown and slippers.

'You swear you aren't pulling my leg?' I kept saying to her. 'You swear you aren't just pretending?'

'Listen,' she said, 'I have known no less than five children who have simply vanished off the face of this earth, never to be seen again. The witches took them.'

'I still think you're just trying to frighten me,' I said.

'I am trying to make sure you don't go the same way,' she said. 'I love you and I want you to stay with me.'

'Tell me about the children who disappeared,' I said...

Active and Passive Voice Activities:

1. Read through the extract from 'The Witches' by Roald Dahl.
2. In one colour, highlight any use of the **active voice**.
3. In another colour, highlight any use of the **passive voice**.
4. Now change them around! What happens to the sound of the story when you swap them over?
5. Around your changes, annotate whether it makes the story better or worse. You **must** make sure you justify your decision otherwise it might not be valid!
6. Go back to the original version of the story – can you now explain why Roald Dahl told his story in the way he did?
7. Finally – did you enjoy this reading? If you did, finish the book – you'll love it!
8. **Extension:** What story does Grandmamma tell Luke? Write the next section, making sure to use active and passive voice at least three times each.