

Evil Stalks the Night

(First published as a Leisure mass market paperback)

By Kathryn Meyer Griffith

*For my beloved family; for all the memories, good and bad.
Long live the memories and the family.*

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CHAPTER ONE

Suncrest 1960

I was ten that summer. I look back now through the haze of the endless summers that came after and remember nearly every minute vividly. I can ask myself now (oh, yes, now) why didn't I see what was to happen? How could I have been so blind and so innocent of the dark forces that stalked us?

But I was a child. Maybe you can't blame a mere child for the later sins of her life. Maybe, heaven help me, my innocence was what saved me.

We lived in a drafty old fortress of blood-colored bricks. I used to think it stood so tall and proud, challenging the skies, just to protect me and my family. There were nine of us who lived in that rambling house that faced the woods. 707 Suncrest. Seven was my mother's lucky number.

There were seven of us children.

I smile now when I think of my mother and her superstitions. But I've turned out to be very much like her, seven is also my lucky number. Or at least it was once, when luck counted. That was a very long time ago. So long ago when we all frolicked in the mysterious woods that ran the length of our street and disappeared among deep ravines and creeks that crisscrossed the land around us. So long ago when we were all safe and laughing in the old house...that summer.

It's a vicious circle I trample in, as life's a vicious circle, the ends always colliding somewhere. How insignificant and weak we are when we rush to try to escape what has to be.

That summer when I was ten and my brother Jimmy was eight, the sun unmercifully scorched the land to a crisp brown and everywhere we ran the grass waved dry and brittle in the shimmering air. The soft greens and pale golds of early spring were long gone.

Could be that year there'd never been a spring. I don't recall one. All I can remember is the swift, deadly heat that began in April and lasted long into October that strange summer.

Jimmy and I spent most of it trying to escape the terrible heat. We crouched together in the tall weeds next to our house and laughed at the silly world, hiding from everyone. Jimmy was a queer little guy even then and I would watch him as he stared emptily into space, or as he chased ladybugs through the grass. He'd never hurt them. Jimmy never could stand to hurt anything, except Charlie.

He'd constantly tease our little brother Charlie with words, or lack of them, but never lay a finger on him, even though I'd be the first one to say that if any child on this earth needed the hand it was Charlie. He was as mean as they come. There were times I truly believed Charlie wasn't Charlie at all, but a demon in Charlie's skin. He could be so cruel.

But Jimmy wasn't anything like Charlie. Jimmy wasn't anything like anybody I've ever known. Jimmy was something special, but he never showed it to anyone. He hid it carefully. It was many years later when I learned why he had.

Jimmy had light green eyes like me. I guess we must have looked a lot alike with our thin, serious faces and tow-blond hair, because a lot of people used to ask if we were twins. We weren't. It was just that I had a special feeling for Jimmy and we went everywhere together; we were inseparable.

I remember one hot day in particular. It was one of those lazy days toward the end of August and we were brooding together out in the woods over the fact that in less than two weeks we would be back in school. Summer was so precious. We never wanted it to end.

"Sure is hot, sis. Whew!" Jimmy wiped a hand across his dirty face and smeared the grime deeper. He was grinning that mischievous grin of his and kicking the weeds into shreds with his brown bare feet as he talked to me. He had this way of using his hands when he spoke, like a magician working at his sleight of hand. I asked him about it once and he merely smiled weakly, but didn't say a word. I felt like there was always something he wasn't telling me.

"It's so hot you can see the heat waves rising in the air." I squinted my eyes and spread my sweaty hands before me. "You see 'em?"

His laugh was odd. "Of course I do, Sarah. Don't you know that I see everything? Don't you know that by now?"

I didn't reply. Silly boy, I thought. Silly child. No one could see *everything*. I truly believed that then and I was the silly one.

"I think I'll go back home and see if Mom'll give me a fudgesicle," he said, and walked away into the sunlight. "It's been hours since we checked in with her. She's probably worried." His voice trailed back lazily on the wind.

"Probably," I said, almost to myself, frowning. I started to follow in his dusty footprints through the jungle of cockleburrs, scratchy twigs, and wilted daisies. My hands skimmed the growth as we went.

I stopped to pick some of the healthier looking flowers, reluctant to follow my brother home. I was afraid Mom would corner us on the rear porch outside the ripped screen door and delegate a mess of new chores to do. Who wanted to go home and work? Not me. Summer was almost over and I had better things to do.

"I just hope that Mom doesn't remember that we never cleaned up that filthy basement yesterday like she told us to," I fretted out loud as our pace speeded up. And the backyard was a junk pile. We had enough work to last us two summers if work was what our mother decided we should do.

We were running then, the hot air rushing through our hair and our bare feet skimming the ground. I stopped, breathless and panting, to rest.

"Come back, Jimmy! I'm stopping for a while!" A huge willow tree looked inviting and I lingered under it, waiting for him to notice I wasn't behind him and double back for me. I didn't want to go home yet. It took him a few moments to realize I was no longer in the race.

"Tired, sis?" He flopped down beside me, hardly breathing hard at all. The boy was a veritable cheetah.

I nodded, and I remember the feeling that came over me in that instant I looked at him, shading my eyes with my hand against the bright sun. I had the most ominous premonition that something was watching us, something very evil was waiting for us. It nearly knocked me over, the feeling was so strong. It was the first time, the *very first*, that I was aware of it. *It was the beginning.*

Panicked, I jumped up and fled that place with a bewildered Jimmy screaming behind me,

"What the heck is the matter? Sarah? Sarah, what are you running for? Will you slow down? Will you slow down!" He caught up to and passed me. I never understood the meaning of what he said then until many, many years later. "You're *safe*, Sarah. You're safe *now*."

At the time I thought he meant tag. I was safe. We were home. He hadn't meant that at all.

I forgot the terrible moment as fast as it came once I reached the first step of our porch. We sat there huffing and puffing, wiping the sweat from our faces, and the run, or the fear, had soaked me. My shorts were wet and the long braids that hung down my back felt clammy and damp to my touch. It was so darn hot.

We sat there for the longest time drying off and listening to the familiar sounds from inside the house. As usual, there were shrieks and cries of children; the strident voice of our mother trying to calm bedlam. "John, no, no, no! Leslie, get me the red bowl up there. Yes, the chipped one." A few moments later, after the sound of the plates hitting the table, mother's voice again: "Has anyone seen Charlie? He has the forks and spoons. Where *is* that child, he was just here. *Charlie!*"

Jimmy and I giggled on the back porch. It was as it should be; all was well in my world. It was a golden time I want to always remember and treasure.

"You know that if we stay out here any longer that old Charlie will come snooping and find us for sure," Jimmy warned. "For sure. Let's sneak down to Satterfield's and ride the ponies." His eyes lit up. "Come on!"

"Naw. I don't feel like it. So what if Charlie finds us? He doesn't mean any harm."

"He's a brat."

"No." I stared him down. "He's just lonely. No one ever wants to play with Charlie and they run him off. How would you like it if the others did that to you all the time?"

"He's mean as an angry hornet, that's why. He bites. He hurts...things," Jimmy defended himself.

"That's why. You'd be mean, too. I told you, he's just lonely and fighting back any way he can. Why can't you all be nicer to Charlie?"

"Because he's a snitch and he's always whining around trying to get people in trouble. You know that nobody can have any fun when Charlie's around to spoil it. He picks his nose, for Christ's sake, Sarah." He grimaced.

Why did Jimmy, of all people, have to feel that way about poor Charlie? Jimmy wasn't like that usually. "Let's go catch the ponies," Jimmy begged.

I sighed, shrugging my shoulders and trying not to smile. I loved Jimmy so much. He was my favorite brother. “Jimmy, first of all, we’re not supposed to be sneaking off to ride those wild ponies at Satterfield’s place. Mother would have our skins. Second, the last time we rode them, I got thrown in the thorn bushes at the edge of the creek and cut my legs to pieces, remember?”

He laughed, and I had to hush him because if Mother heard us out there she would recruit us for K.P. duty, pronto.

“Well, it was either the thorn bushes or the creek, and those rocks didn’t look all that soft. I chose land.” I held my chin up until it hurt. “That’s just another reason why we should stay away from those wild animals. I could have broken my—”

“Rear, you mean?” Jimmy supplied the word. “You sure looked funny flying through the air when the pony ditched you. For Pete’s sake, you should have been able to stay on it. It was such a *little* pony, Sarah.”

“How do you know? I don’t remember you riding one. You could never catch one.”

“I tried.” He could be so stubborn when he set his mind to it.

“Did you? Did you really?” And it was my turn to laugh at him as I remembered the way he’d desperately tried to run down one of the tiny ponies and been dragged through the brambles for his trouble. He was too afraid of them. Sure, I’d been thrown, but at least I’d caught one to be thrown from.

“They was wild!”

“They was *mad*, is what they were. Besides, Mother’s right, they don’t belong to us and we had no right. That was why I got thrown. God punished me.” I said that last part so righteously. I lived the Ten Commandments and I believed. I truly believed in God and the punishment for sins.

Jimmy tossed me a funny look. “There is no God!” He spat. It wasn’t what he said that upset me so much, it was that he truly believed it. I could see it in his eyes. It was as if he knew something that no one else knew, and he *knew* there was no God.

“Jimmy!” I was shocked, as I often was at his anger and his blasphemy.

“There is no God, Sarah, and you didn’t get thrown because it was wrong and I *still* think Charlie is a creep!” It tumbled out like angry bees and his face turned red and ugly. Was this monster my Jimmy?

I forgot and became angry at what he’d said about poor Charlie. Jimmy was lounging on the bottom step and I on the top one. I could feel the warmth of the wood under me from the hot sun. I could feel the splinters break away from the step as I bounced down to come even with Jimmy

Charlie needed a champion and I was the only one around. Not much, but Joan of Arc had always appealed to me—the romantic idealism behind it, not necessarily dying in the flames. I squared my jaw at my younger brother and jumped in.

He’s our *brother*, for Pete’s sake, and he’s only six! Don’t you have any heart?” I hissed, pinching his upper arm through the thin material of his plaid shirt to drive my point home.

“Ouch! Sarah, you rat!” he yelped, and lunged at me, finally laughing, and we rolled down the yard into the grass tumbling over and over in our mock anger. All a game. Always a game. I could never stay mad at Jimmy or he at me. We got up and started to brush each other’s clothes off.

“You look like a dust ball!” he teased, trying to make amends in his own way. He hung his head and shifted his eyes around to see if there were anyone around spying on us, then he dropped his voice to a whisper. “But he’s so old for only six. He hates everybody and everything.” Then, even lower, so low I had to strain to hear: “He’s a real pain in the ass.”

“James Towers!” I turned away from him in disgust and climbed the porch steps. “You ought to have that filthy mouth of yours washed out with a bar of soap. Strong soap with lots of suds. Where do you ever pick up such language? It can’t be from our parents. It can’t be from *me*.”

I jumped up the steps three at a time, Jimmy trotting behind me like a hound on a scent. “What am I gonna do with you? I swear, you’re gonna go to the devil one of these days if you don’t clean up your act, brother. And that’s one place I can’t help you with.” I gave him a penetrating look. “How can you hate your own brother like that?”

“I don’t *hate* him, exactly.” He was relenting again. “Well, he *is* a snitch. Even you have to admit that, Sarah. But I’ll tell you what.” He walked up to me, bright green eyes sparkling and a sudden grin on his face. “I’ll try to be nicer to him, I really will, for you, for a while, anyway, Sarah. I promise.”

We were standing in front of the kitchen door and Jimmy scooted past me and laid his hand on the doorknob, turning to look back at me over his shoulder. "You coming in?"

The house looked so cool. Its familiar musty scent was cool. Even though it was a shabby old house with wooden floors and porches that leaned to one side and creaked in the summer storms, we cherished it. I couldn't count the times I'd scrubbed those wooden floors on my hands and knees or helped brush a coat of much needed paint over those cracked walls, but I never minded the work. It was home.

The basement contained a pre-war furnace and the coal was stored in a tiny room with a trap door to the outside. One time Jimmy and I foolishly decided to make the coal chute our secret way into the house and snuck in through its black narrowness. We came out looking like two black goblins and got caught and got a spanking to boot.

The coal chute opened above our mother's prized rock garden on the side of the house, and Jimmy and I spent many long hot summer days searching the neighborhood for sparkling treasures to stock it with. I loved to sit in the middle of it and lift the glittering rocks in the sun, reflecting their rainbows over the bricks of the house and the grass. There were small golden ones and huge silver-streaked ones with white frothy stuff running through them. Some of the rocks looked like solid glass, clear or milky white, even pastels as soft as a baby's breath. I have never seen a rock garden like that one in all my days since. Those rocks were poor man's jewels that we lugged near and far.

Sometimes Jimmy and I took some of the prettiest ones up into the protective branches of our cherry tree that stood sentinel at the end of the sloped lawn. We played with them when we weren't too busy stuffing our mouths with the cherries when they were in season.

From there we could also see Mother's collection of climbing roses. Red, yellow and pink blooms that filled the air with their thick sweetness. I took a deep breath of the perfumed air.

"Coming?" Jimmy's voice returned me to reality in the fading rosy light of the waning sun. The day was ending and I always fancied that at that precise time of day the world was standing still. It's the hour of the day when everything is bathed in that strange soft light that smooths the sharp edges and makes everything appear as a surrealistic painting.

We'd go in each evening and eat the big supper Mother slaved so hard over and then we'd fight over who got the first hot bath. Later, we'd sprawl in front of the black-and-white television set, more than willing to be scared out of our wits or entertained by shows like *The Twilight Zone* and *Zorro* and then, if the weather was nice, we older ones would sneak out and play hide-and-seek beneath the rising moon, wallowing through the deep gullies that ripped through the fields behind our house. We were a pack of young wolves tracking the countryside, running the fences, trying not to make a sound and give ourselves away in the moonlight.

Those were the good years, before I was shown the horror that was to be my life and I forever froze those memories in my child's mind like butterflies in amber.

"Sarah? Come on in here and help me set the table for supper." It was my mother calling me. I ran down the steps, impulsively plucked a rosebud and went in and stood before her.

"It's nice you could grace us with your presence, young lady," she said sharply. "Where have you been?" It was forever the same. She didn't mean to sound so short tempered, but dealing with seven kids pushed her to the end of her patience.

"Out playing, Mom, but here I am. See?" I smiled, withdrawing and presenting my gift to her, then moved to lay out the plates.

"About time, too," she remarked, but not as sharply as before. She was wearing one of her flowered sun dresses I remember so well and she was sweating from the heat of a stove on a summer's day. She twirled the rose in her fingers, then leveled steel-blue eyes at me; eyes that echoed Charlie's like a mirror, yet managed to hold a special warmth that was hers alone. She was still a beautiful woman, after seven children and years of broken dreams. She smiled a rare smile. I sighed, knowing I was off the hook, and dinner ran its usual course.

Mother once confessed to me that she'd wanted to be a nurse. But we children had stolen that dream from her.

"But Mom, you *are* a nurse." I'd smiled back at her, trying to make her see. "You get to nurse all of us." She only nodded and planted a kiss on my cheek. Had it been sadness I glimpsed in those blue eyes?

She'd told me, "For you, Sarah, it'll be different. Just remember to follow your dreams to the end, girl

and never give up. I let mine go too easily, but you, you never let go. You'll make it, I know."

"Are you sorry you had us all, then?" I'd asked, taking her work-worn hands in mine. "Do you hate us for it?"

She gave me that wistful smile of hers and shook her head. "No, child, I'm not sorry I had you kids. I love you children and, well, against dreams I suppose love wins every time. Love is more powerful than dreams or anything. Don't ever forget that."

She'd looked at me as if she were trying to tell me some great secret. I knew she loved us very much. I never doubted that. And I promised her I'd never give up my dreams. Never.

"I'll be an artist someday, Mom. I'll be an artist or a writer. Truly. I promise."

She'd laughed and hugged me. I think there were tears in her eyes. "I just bet you will, Sarah-girl. You're one of those special ones that fate has laid a heavy finger on and you're bound to be something special, too."

Of course, I thought she'd only said that because I was her daughter, with no thought that she might have been foretelling what was to come. Don't all parents say that to their offspring? And don't all parents hope for better for their children than what they've known?

My mother and father had it rough, especially with all us children. It affected my mother, though, in more ways than my father. In general he was an easy-going kind of individual. My mother would worry and fret herself sick over money and bills.

My father was a salesman for a building company that did siding and small home improvements, and the money was sporadic or at times nonexistent. One day we'd be as rich as kings and the next as poor as beggar mice, and it drove my mother up a wall. If there were no food for the table or money to pay the bills, Mother was practically impossible to live with. Her fiery temper matched her red hair, and she sometimes vented her frustrations on us children, but almost always on our father. I would lie in bed half the night listening to their angry voices bouncing through the house, trying to block out the misery with a pillow squeezed over my ears. I loved them both, and I couldn't see for the life of me why they'd to take out their anger that way on each other when they were supposed to love each other so. I thought that it'd have been easier if they'd pulled together at those bad times instead of pulling apart.

I usually sided with my father, a champion of the underdog. I felt so sorry for him when he came dragging home late at night without the promised money from the big deal and had to confront my mother's wrath. I tried to ease his hurt in any way I could. I'd fix him the supper my mother was too angry to bother with and serve him like a condemned prisoner. He'd failed, sure, but he'd tried. He deserved something for that.

But like with Charlie, I could help but I couldn't cure. It made me feel so helpless.

My grandmother hit it on the head when she stated that my real problem was a soft heart. "You can't cure all the evils of the world with a tender heart, child," she'd warned me.

Grandmother was unusually astute in her observations. Mary Elizabeth Summers was undeniably Old German. She'd come over a penniless immigrant when she was a child of ten and had married a hard-headed second generation German. She'd had only one child, my mother. My grandmother had desired a large family, but had to be content with one child because Grampa was a frugal, practical man. Thing was, he lived long enough to see his seventh grandchild, Samantha, born, yet died before Samantha was old enough to call him Grampa.

Grandmother had loved her husband but adapted quickly.

Everyone knew we children were her whole life and she adored us. Grampa's frugality left her with a sizeable bank account, which Grandmother promptly lavished on us whenever our famine, or her fancy, struck—and she owned an ancient monstrous house with the mortgage paid in full. It was less than a block down the street from us and Grandmother lived there the rest of her days.

Grandmother Summers was unusual, to say the least, and there were those in the neighborhood who said she was more than a little strange . . . and some thought she was a witch. Looking back, I understand why. I believe she had a limited gift of foresight. What really made her a candidate for unflattering speculation was her keen, if not obsessed, interest in the unknown. Her old house was as spooky a place as any child could dream of and she collected books on the supernatural. She believed in ghosts and demons and didn't care what the world whispered about her sanity. She conducted séances in her sewing room, and some swore they'd contacted their lost loved ones. Everyone, but us, was deathly afraid of the old woman.

My grandmother, in the years before Grampa died, would visit and keep an eye on us; we never went without if she could help it. But in the later years of her life she became an invalid and a recluse, but still saw us kids. She took to having us three older children overnight or for the weekend. Perhaps she was afraid of being alone, wouldn't admit it, but we didn't care what her reasons were, because staying with Grandmother was a real treat. We loved it. I, especially, loved to help take care of her and listen to her strange stories.

"Have I told you the story about the girl who died but wasn't really dead?" She'd always start it that way even though each of us had heard it since the day we were old enough to listen. No one could tell a story the way my grandmother could. She sat in her wheelchair huddled under a crocheted blanket and shook her bony finger at us. She'd aged almost overnight. Her once beautiful blue eyes and lively smile had faded into shadows of their former selves, and her lovely red hair was nothing but ghostly wisps. Sometimes I'd see her staring out the windows or at the walls as if she saw something beyond them that we couldn't and there was fear in her dull eyes. It used to frighten me. I thought, though, that it was her age and Grampa being gone; her being alone and old. Helpless.

I was wrong.

We'd all sit on the floor at her feet, our eyes wide and riveted as we silently urged her to go on and tell the story again. The lights were dim in the house, it was late, and the television was turned down, casting its feeble, flickering light over the walls of the front room like bony fingers. My oldest sister, Leslie, hung on her every word. I was more skeptical at times.

Grandmother smiled grimly, looking directly at me to catch my eye.

"You don't believe me, do you, Sarah?" Her voice crackled, the German accent still detectable, and she cocked her head at me.

I humored her. I wanted to believe. "Yes, Grandmother, I believe you." I whispered, hoping God wouldn't hear that boldfaced lie and strike me dead on the spot. "Go on with the story." I grinned at her.

"Well, child, it did happen, I know for a fact." Her thin hand reached out and touched my shoulder, resting there as though she were afraid I would run off. "Back in those days, medical science wasn't what it is today and people were very superstitious. Things they couldn't understand got labeled as witchery or the like," she said.

"Many people died, especially among the poor in winter, when there was no work or food to be had. Sometimes there were no doctors to say what they died of. Those were bad days. Ignorant people didn't know no better. They dropped their dead into pine boxes and lowered them into the cold earth to wait for Judgment Day. They were mourned and then forgotten. If you were poor, you lived, you died, and that was the end of it. It made no difference if you were a child or an old person. You worked in the fields until death claimed you." She shrugged her stooped shoulders and paused for effect, her eyes far away.

"Sarah!" she'd suddenly snap, singling me out again.

"Yes, I'm listening, Grandmother."

She'd go on slowly.

"There was this girl, about fourteen, and the people of the town were afraid of her. She was a strange one, always keeping to herself. She heard and saw things that no one else could see or hear."

"She was a witch, Grandma!" Leslie piped up, smugly.

"No!" My grandmother seemed annoyed. "No, she wasn't. They, the stupid people, just thought she was. But she wasn't." Her voice was sad. "She had a *gift*, that's what. They didn't understand. She'd always been a frail child, and she'd done only good for others. Yet one morning her brother found her at the fringe of the woods near the end of town and she couldn't talk, couldn't move, and she died a few days later. No one knew how or why.

"Her parents had loved her very much and their grief was almost too much to bear, but they dried their tears and buried her at the forest's edge, where she was found. She'd loved the woods and the open skies, and back then you didn't keep bodies around too long, especially in her case. The townspeople hadn't been easy over her curious death."

"Then what?" Leslie had asked, her eyes bright as she licked her lips. We were all gluttons for punishment.

"They buried her in a shallow grave."

We held our breaths, shivering in the darkened room.

“But her mother grieved for her daughter and began to have terrible dreams that the child was calling her, begging for her help; that she wasn’t really dead. People thought the woman had gone mad with grief.”

At that point I felt as if someone had brushed my shoulder, when there was no one there to do it; as if someone had walked across my grave, and it frightened and confused me. I wasn’t one easily scared. Seeing something in the corner of my eye I looked closely at the window. There was nothing there. I glanced at Jimmy, so silent whenever my grandmother told her stories. He was staring at the window, too. I shivered.

“Tell us about the ring,” Leslie said, her face rapt.

“Ah, yes. The girl had this ring. It was a keepsake that her great-grandmother had given her for her birthday many years before and it was a pretty thing of tiny golden leaves. It was her treasure. Her parents could have taken it and sold it for money, for they were poor, but her mother wouldn’t dream of it and it was buried with the girl.

“But there were those who had less scruples. When the girl had been laid to rest, one of the gravediggers had taken a fancy to have it. A peasant with six hungry little ones at home, the man was desperate. He’d never robbed the dead before, a despicable thing, but one of his six children was gravely ill and might not live to see the next sunrise if he didn’t get her medical help.

“So that first night after the girl had been buried he crept through the dark woods to the grave. He’d have the ring though he had to dig up a grave to do it. He was sure God would forgive him because his need was just.

“There was a storm that night and he was filled with fear at what he was about to do. He hurriedly dug up the pitiful grave, opened the lid of the coffin and bent to slip the ring off the small finger.

“But it wouldn’t come off. Cursing, shaking with the wet and the fear, he knew the only way to get it was to *slice off the finger itself* and flee with it. Later he could cut the ring free.”

We’d all been as quiet as the graveyard by then, waiting. Every noise and strange shadow seemed endowed with its own unearthly sinister intention. It’d begun raining outside. The wind moaned. The house grew chilly and we shivered beneath the blankets we’d been given. Our grandmother had stopped to stare out the window.

“Go on!” we’d all begged. All of us, that is, except Charlie. He’d sit and watch us as if he enjoyed our fear. He grinned when we grimaced, giggled when we gasped. Silently, he turned back to the sound of our grandmother’s voice.

“He was terribly frightened by then, and cut the cold finger swiftly from the body and that’s when he heard....”

“What?” Jimmy demanded. The room’s shadows menaced us, and the wind outside the house echoed the screeching of the restless dead in their shallow graves. The trees scratched the windows as if seeking entrance and my grandmother’s voice turned foreign to all of us.

It struck fear deep inside of me and I wondered why. It was only a story, after all.

“The girl began to moan aloud in her coffin and to stir and the gravedigger bellowed in terror. The dead had come alive! Not wanting to wait to see what would happen next, he fled the graveyard as if all the devils of hell were riding on his coattails. He was terrified that the corpse was following him, crying for its missing finger, and in his haste he threw it back toward the body as he ran.

“She wasn’t actually dead, was she?” Leslie, the down-to-earth one of us, interjected softly, her pretty face pale and her dark eyes glazed.

We knew how the story ended.

“No, that’s what they say.” There’d been a peculiar note in Grandmother’s voice. “It seems the mother had had such a vivid dream about her daughter that the father promised to go out to the grave himself at dawn and show the crazy woman that their daughter was truly dead. But when the father got to the grave, he was shocked to see it open and his daughter sitting up, weeping softly, in her coffin, her hand wrapped in the hem of her bloody skirt...alive after all. He took her home, thanking God each step he carried her and crying for joy, as his wife did, too. They nursed the girl to health again, grateful to have her back, minus a finger or not.”

“God!” John had gulped, gripping his little twin sister’s arm.

Amy sucked her thumb, her eyes as big as saucers.

“They call it the ‘sleeping sickness,’ don’t they?” Leslie enlightened us. “And when people have it they fall into a coma so deep they look like they’re really dead but they aren’t.” She trembled, as we all did. “Ooh, that story still gives me the creeps.”

“Cutting her finger like that started her circulation again and she woke up, right?” I solved the riddle. Jimmy and Charlie remained silent, listening to the night noises outside, thinking.

“Possibly,” our grandmother replied spookily. “Though some said she was a witch, others said she was purely lucky.” She’d gazed directly at me and said, “But the town feared her after that and shunned her like the plague. Her life wasn’t a happy one. People hate the things they don’t understand and try to destroy them. They don’t know any better.”

Had that been pity in her old eyes—for me? I turned away, unable to bear her piercing gaze, and something fluttered inside me. Perhaps a warning of things to come.

“I don’t believe she was bad. I don’t believe she was a witch,” I said firmly. “If the story’s true at all.” I expressed my doubts every time I heard the tale, but Grandmother never argued.

Many years later, right before she died, in fact, she finally made me believe in it. “The girl in the story, you see,” she’d said slowly, “was your great-great-grandmother.”

The truth in her eyes and the shock of it had made me speechless. For some reason, I accepted what she’d said completely and never asked another word about it.

I couldn’t. I didn’t want to know the answers.

That was all a very long time ago, and I wish I could forget it.

Oh, if I only could.
