The Witch Next Door

Little girls with overactive imaginations need to remember: Appearances can be deceiving.

By Sherry Hooker

Saw her, I tell ya!" I exclaimed. Shawnee, Annette and I were sprawled on our bellies in the tall grass next to the railroad tracks. It was 1957, and I had just informed my little sister and my cousin that there was a broom-riding, kid-eating witch living right across the tracks from our grandparents' house in rural Ohio.

Our parents worked, so our grandparents looked after Shawnee and me. We were expected to amuse ourselves, and my favorite pastime was telling stories, especially scary stories that would make Shawnee squeal.

"Sherry, you're just trying to scare us," Shawnee squealed. "You know what Mommy told you about making up stories."

Shawnee and I were a year and a half apart in age, but we were both chubby little blondes. Cousin Annette was my age, but her straight, dark hair and stick-thin body made her my total opposite.

"Don't be such a big baby," she said. "Sherry's not scaring anyone."

I wriggled my way between them. "If you two don't shut up, she'll hear us. Do you want to end up in a cook pot?"

"Now you're just plain lying. No one eats kids." I gave my sister the coldest glare I could manage and spoke in a sawmill whisper: "Witches do."

She got that expression I'd seen before—the one that says, "I don't believe you, but just in case, I'm gonna run!" She was already lifting herself off the ground when we heard a baby crying. She dropped back down like a rock.

We raised ourselves just high enough to peer over the tall grass. The witch wasn't close enough for us to get a good look at her face, but I got an impression of two lumps of coal in a white mass, and what looked like spiderwebs hanging from beneath a pointed hat. She was dressed all in black, and she carried a large bundle of grass in her arms.

Then a crisp breeze carried her words to us: "I'm

coming, my pretty. Be patient." Still carrying the grass, she entered the open basement. After a few minutes, she came back out, wiping the shiny blade of an ax.



Shown here are the author (right), age 9, and her sister, Chontee (left), age 7. The author always called her sister "Shawnee" because she couldn't bronounce her real name.

Shawnee had had all she could take. She jumped to her feet and ran like a rabbit with hounds in pursuit. In silent agreement, Annette and I bolted to Grandma's back door a full minute ahead of Shawnee. My sister's eyes showed how scared she was, and I felt a tinge of guilt.

"Aw, she's just a baby," Annette piped.

"I noticed *she* wasn't the first one on the porch," I said in an unusual act of sisterly protection.

Annette bristled. "I was just trying to keep up with you."

Turning to Shawnee, I said, "This is our secret, OK? Mommy and Grandma will think I made it up." At first I thought she was going to protest, but she nodded in agreement as she went inside.

Annette caught my arm. "What do you think she did with that ax?"

Remembering the baby's cry and the shiny blade, I shivered. "I don't even want to guess."

Later that night, we played Monopoly with Annette and several other cousins. The adults were in the dining room playing cards as they did every Friday night. Then Annette glanced toward the French doors, and her eyes grew large with fear. She clapped one hand over her mouth and pointed the other at a single dark eye in the center of a white blob pressed against the glass.

Shawnee let out a bloodcurdling scream. We jumped up and ran, nearly colliding with our parents as they ran to us. Annette stammered, "It's ... a ... a cyclops! It's trying to get us!"

Mommy looked angrily at me. "Sherry, what have I told you?"

Uncle Bob ran outside to investigate and came back a few minutes later wearing a puzzled expression. "I heard someone running, but he disappeared. You kids go back to your game. With all the commotion you made, I doubt he'll be back tonight."

Then Grandma began laughing, and everyone stared at her like she had lost her mind. "That was probably Ma Smith. The poor woman can barely see. When she comes to visit, she'll press her face to the door to make sure we don't have company."

"Ma Smith, my eye!" cousin Larry spouted. "That thing wasn't human!" I looked at Shawnee and pressed my finger to my lips.

We were having breakfast at our grandparents' house when there was a sudden tap on the door. It was the witch! "Come on in, Ma," Grandma said, motioning the old lady to a chair. "Ma, these are two of our grandchildren, Sherry and Shawnee. Girls, this is Ma Smith."

Ma accepted the cup of coffee Grandma offered and croaked, "Look how rosy their chubby cheeks are. I just *love* children." Shawnee glanced up from her bowl of oatmeal, then jumped from her chair and ran out the door.

"What's got into that crazy sister of yours?" Grandma asked. I shrugged and faked interest in my cereal. But while Ma and Grandma were talking, I was observing.

Ma's face appeared to be made of crumpled leather, with lines crisscrossing it like the ones on Daddy's road map. Her nose was long and skinny. Near the middle, it bent downward past her narrow lips, nearly touching her pointed chin. Her clawlike fingers were never still. She wore men's clothes and work boots. She turned as though sensing my prying eyes, and I attacked the last of my oatmeal with gusto. I handed Grandma my empty bowl and was about to make my escape when Ma reached out and lightly pinched my cheek. "I do love children."

"B-b-bye," I stammered and ran.

Shawnee leaned back on the swing and pushed off. "What took you so long?"

I sat in the other swing next to her. "My oatmeal got harder to swallow."

Shawnee started to laugh, then asked, "You weren't scared, were you?"

"You didn't stick around to be sized up for her oven!" I replied in my own defense.

"She did say she loves children."

"Yeah, plump and tender," I said, rubbing my cheek. I wished I were as skinny as Annette.

That was to be our last encounter with Ma Smith for several months. We were relocating to Florida, so we were busy getting ready for the move. On the morning of our departure, we stopped by to tell our grandparents goodbye.

Gramps and Grandma came to our car window. They kissed us, and Mommy got out of the car to have a few words with them. That's when Shawnee punched me in the ribs. "The witch is coming!"

Sure enough, Ma was crossing the tracks, carrying something in her arms. When she got to our window, we could see it was a goat kid.

"I wanted you girls to see my baby before you left." We petted its soft head as Ma said, "I'm going to miss the sounds of you two at play, especially your laughter. You know how much I love children."

I looked up from petting the goat and saw that Ma was crying. It was so unexpected that it took my breath away.

After all, everyone knows witches don't cry. �