A haunting tale as it features a fourteen-year-old Alice Munro in a type of existential crisis.

The story begins with an appendectomy during which the doctor also removed some kind of growth. Was it cancer? Alice never really wondered, and obviously whatever it was turned out okay, because here she is still alive and in her eighties. The summer that followed the surgery, Alice lazed around in the days and had a hard time sleeping at night. For the first time in her life, no one enforced a bed time, so she was free to do what she liked. It was a kind of freedom that eventually leads, in a classic manner, to a kind of existential angst brought on by the confrontation with one’s freedom and responsibilities.

You might think this was a liberation. At first, perhaps it was. The freedom. The strangeness. But as my failure to fall asleep prolonged itself, and as it finally took hold altogether until it changed into the dawn, I became more and more disturbed by it.

She later says, “I was not myself.” Never before has she had this freedom, and suddenly she is confronting it in a dark way, at night.

By this time it wasn’t sleep I was after. I knew mere sleep wasn’t likely. Maybe not even desirable. Something was taking hold of me and it was my business, my hope, to fight it off. I had the sense to do that, but only barely, as it seemed. Whatever it was was trying to tell me to do things, not exactly for any reason but just to see if such acts were possible. It was informing me that motives were not necessary.

What is this thing telling her to do? Strangle her sister, who slept in the bunk below:

The worst. Here in the most familiar place, the room where we had lain for all of our lives and thought ourselves most safe. I might do it for no reason I or anybody could understand, except that I could not help it.

Alice takes to getting up, walking straight out the room (without looking at her sister), and going outside to walk the night streets. All of this leads to an excellent ending where she happens upon her father, also out in the dark. Something he says gives Alice the ability to sleep even though the adult world, with its freedoms and responsibilities, stands in her way.