

LBRIS

We know
books

SHIRLEY JACKSON

*We Have Always Lived
in the Castle*



PENGUIN BOOKS

I

My name is Mary Katherine Blackwood. I am eighteen years old, and I live with my sister Constance. I have often thought that with any luck at all I could have been born a werewolf, because the two middle fingers on both my hands are the same length, but I have had to be content with what I had. I dislike washing myself, and dogs, and noise. I like my sister Constance, and Richard Plantagenet, and *Amanita phalloides*, the death-cup mushroom. Everyone else in my family is dead.

The last time I glanced at the library books on the kitchen shelf they were more than five months overdue, and I wondered whether I would have chosen differently if I had known that these were the last books, the ones which would stand forever on our kitchen shelf. We rarely moved things; the Blackwoods were never much of a family for restlessness and stirring. We dealt with the small surface transient objects, the books and the flowers and the spoons, but underneath we had always a solid foundation of stable possessions. We always put things back where they belonged. We dusted and swept under tables and chairs and beds and pictures and rugs and lamps, but we left them where they were; the tortoise-shell toilet set on our mother's dressing table was never off place by so much as a fraction of an inch. Blackwoods had always lived in our house, and kept their things in order; as soon as a new Blackwood wife moved in, a place was found for her belongings, and so our

house was built up with layers of Blackwood property weighting it, and keeping it steady against the world.

It was on a Friday in late April that I brought the library books into our house. Fridays and Tuesdays were terrible days, because I had to go into the village. Someone had to go to the library, and the grocery; Constance never went past her own garden, and Uncle Julian could not. Therefore it was not pride that took me into the village twice a week, or even stubbornness, but only the simple need for books and food. It may have been pride that brought me into Stella's for a cup of coffee before I started home; I told myself it was pride and would not avoid going into Stella's no matter how much I wanted to be at home, but I knew, too, that Stella would see me pass if I did not go in, and perhaps think I was afraid, and that thought I could not endure.

'Good morning, Mary Katherine,' Stella always said, reaching over to wipe the counter with a damp rag, 'how are you today?'

'Very well, thank you.'

'And Constance Blackwood, is she well?'

'Very well, thank you.'

'And how is *he*?'

'As well as can be expected. Black coffee, please.'

If anyone else came in and sat down at the counter I would leave my coffee without seeming hurried, and leave, nodding goodbye to Stella. 'Keep well,' she always said automatically as I went out.

I chose the library books with care. There were books in our house, of course; our father's study had books covering two walls, but I liked fairy tales and books of history, and Constance liked books about food. Although Uncle Julian never took up a book, he liked to see Constance reading in the evenings while he worked at his papers, and sometimes he turned his head to look at her and nod.

'What are you reading, my dear? A pretty sight, a lady with a book.'

'I'm reading something called *The Art of Cooking*, Uncle Julian.'

'Admirable.'

We never sat quietly for long, of course, with Uncle Julian in the room, but I do not recall that Constance and I have ever opened the library books which are still on our kitchen shelf. It was a fine April morning when I came out of the library; the sun was shining and the false glorious promises of spring were everywhere, showing oddly through the village grime. I remember that I stood on the library steps holding my books and looking for a minute at the soft hinted green in the branches against the sky and wishing, as I always did, that I could walk home across the sky instead of through the village. From the library steps I could cross the street directly and walk on the other side along to the grocery, but that meant that I must pass the general store and the men sitting in front. In this village the men stayed young and did the gossiping and the women aged with grey evil weariness and stood silently waiting for the men to get up and come home. I could leave the library and walk up the street on this side until I was opposite the grocery and then cross; that was preferable, although it took me past the post office and the Rochester house with the piles of rusted tin and the broken automobiles and the empty gas tins and the old mattresses and plumbing fixtures and wash tubs that the Harler family brought home and – I genuinely believe – loved.

The Rochester house was the loveliest in town and had once had a walnut-panelled library and a second-floor ballroom and a profusion of roses along the veranda; our mother had been born there and by rights it should have belonged to Constance. I decided as I always did that it would be safer to go past the post office and the Rochester house, although I disliked seeing the

house where our mother was born. This side of the street was generally deserted in the morning, since it was shady, and after I went into the grocery I would in any case have to pass the general store to get home, and passing it going and coming was more than I could bear.

Outside the village, on Hill Road and River Road and Old Mountain, people like the Clarkes and the Carringtons had built new lovely homes. They had to come through the village to get to Hill Road and River Road because the main street of the village was also the main highway across the state, but the Clarke children and the Carrington boys went to private schools and the food in the Hill Road kitchens came from the towns and the city; mail was taken from the village post office by car along the River Road and up to Old Mountain, but the Mountain people mailed their letters in the towns and the River Road people had their hair cut in the city.

I was always puzzled that the people of the village, living in their dirty little houses on the main highway or out on Creek Road, smiled and nodded and waved when the Clarkes and the Carringtons drove by; if Helen Clarke came into Elbert's Grocery to pick up a can of tomato sauce or a pound of coffee her cook had forgotten everyone told her 'Good morning,' and said the weather was better today. The Clarkes' house is newer but no finer than the Blackwood house. Our father brought home the first piano ever seen in the village. The Carringtons own the paper mill but the Blackwoods own all the land between the highway and the river. The Shepherds of Old Mountain gave the village its town hall, which is white and peaked and set in a green lawn with a cannon in front. There was some talk once of putting in zoning laws in the village and tearing down the shacks on Creek Road and building up the whole village to match the town hall, but no one ever lifted a finger; maybe they thought the Blackwoods might take to attending town meetings if they

did. The villagers get their hunting and fishing licenses in the town hall, and once a year the Clarkes and the Carringtons and the Shepherds attend the town meeting and solemnly vote to get the Harler junk yard off Main Street and take away the benches in front of the general store, and each year the villagers gleefully outvote them. Past the town hall, bearing to the left, is Blackwood Road, which is the way home. Blackwood Road goes in a great circle around the Blackwood land and along every inch of Blackwood Road is a wire fence built by our father. Not far past the town hall is the big black rock which marks the entrance to the path where I unlock the gate and lock it behind me and go through the woods and am home.

The people of the village have always hated us.

I played a game when I did the shopping. I thought about the children's games where the board is marked into little spaces and each player moves according to a throw of the dice; there were always dangers, like 'lose one turn' and 'go back four spaces' and 'return to Start,' and little helps, like 'advance three spaces' and 'take an extra turn.' The library was my start and the black rock was my goal. I had to move down one side of Main Street, cross, and then move up the other side until I reached the black rock, when I would win. I began well, with a good safe turn along the empty side of Main Street, and perhaps this would turn out to be one of the very good days; it was like that sometimes, but not often on spring mornings. If it was a very good day I would later make an offering of jewelry out of gratitude.

I walked quickly when I started, taking a deep breath to go on with and not looking around; I had the library books and my shopping bag to carry and I watched my feet moving one after the other; two feet in our mother's old brown shoes. I felt someone watching me from inside the post office – we did not accept

mail, and we did not have a telephone; both had become unbearable six years before – but I could bear a quick stare from the office; that was old Miss Dutton, who never did her staring out in the open like other folks, but only looked out between blinds or from behind curtains. I never looked at the Rochester house. I could not bear to think of our mother being born there. I wondered sometimes if the Harler people knew that they lived in a house which should have belonged to Constance; there was always so much noise of crashing tinware in their yard that they could not hear me walking. Perhaps the Harlers thought that the unending noise drove away demons, or perhaps they were musical and found it agreeable; perhaps the Harlers lived inside the way they did outside, sitting in old bathtubs and eating their dinner off broken plates set on the skeleton of an old Ford car, rattling cans as they ate, and talking in bellows. A spray of dirt always lay across the sidewalk where the Harlers lived.

Crossing the street (lose one turn) came next, to get to the grocery directly opposite. I always hesitated, vulnerable and exposed, on the side of the road while the traffic went by. Most Main Street traffic was going through, cars and trucks passing through the village because the highway did, so the drivers hardly glanced at me; I could tell a local car by the quick ugly glance from the driver and I wondered, always, what would happen if I stepped down from the curb onto the road; would there be a quick, almost unintended swerve toward me? Just to scare me, perhaps, just to see me jump? And then the laughter, coming from all sides, from behind the blinds in the post office, from the men in front of the general store, from the women peering out of the grocery doorway, all of them watching and gloating, to see Mary Katherine Blackwood scurrying out of the way of a car. I sometimes lost two or even three turns because I waited so carefully for the road to clear in both directions before I crossed.

In the middle of the street I came out of the shade and into the bright, misleading sunshine of April; by July the surface of the road would be soft in the heat and my feet would stick, making the crossing more perilous (Mary Katherine Blackwood, her foot caught in the tar, cringing as a car bore down on her; go back, all the way, and start over), and the buildings would be uglier. All of the village was of a piece, a time, and a style; it was as though the people needed the ugliness of the village, and fed on it. The houses and the stores seemed to have been set up in contemptuous haste to provide shelter for the drab and the unpleasant, and the Rochester house and the Blackwood house and even the town hall had been brought here perhaps accidentally from some far lovely country where people lived with grace. Perhaps the fine houses had been captured – perhaps as punishment for the Rochesters and the Blackwoods and their secret bad hearts? – and were held prisoner in the village; perhaps their slow rot was a sign of the ugliness of the villagers. The row of stores along Main Street was unchangingly grey. The people who owned the stores lived above them, in a row of second-story apartments, and the curtains in the regular line of second-story windows were pale and without life; whatever planned to be colorful lost its heart quickly in the village. The blight on the village never came from the Blackwoods; the villagers belonged here and the village was the only proper place for them.

I always thought about rot when I came toward the row of stores; I thought about burning black painful rot that ate away from inside, hurting dreadfully. I wished it on the village.

I had a shopping list for the grocery; Constance made it out for me every Tuesday and Friday before I left home. The people of the village disliked the fact that we always had plenty of money to pay for whatever we wanted; we had taken our money out of the bank, of course, and I knew they talked about the

money hidden in our house, as though it were great heaps of golden coins and Constance and Uncle Julian and I sat in the evenings, our library books forgotten, and played with it, running our hands through it and counting and stacking and tumbling it, jeering and mocking behind locked doors. I imagine that there were plenty of rotting hearts in the village coveting our heaps of golden coins but they were cowards and they were afraid of Blackwoods. When I took my grocery list out of my shopping bag I took out the purse too so that Elbert in the grocery would know that I had brought money and he could not refuse to sell to me.

It never mattered who was in the grocery. I was always served at once; Mr Elbert or his pale greedy wife always came right away from wherever they were in the store to get me what I wanted. Sometimes, if their older boy was helping out in school vacation, they hurried to make sure that he was not the one who waited on me and once when a little girl – a child strange to the village, of course – came close to me in the grocery Mrs Elbert pulled her back so roughly that she screamed and then there was a long still minute while everyone waited before Mrs Elbert took a breath and said, 'Anything else?' I always stood perfectly straight and stiff when the children came close, because I was afraid of them. I was afraid that they might touch me and the mothers would come at me like a flock of taloned hawks; that was always the picture I had in my mind – birds descending, striking, gashing with razor claws. Today I had a great many things to buy for Constance, and it was a relief to see that there were no children in the store and not many women; take an extra turn, I thought, and said to Mr Elbert, 'Good morning.'

He nodded to me; he could not go entirely without greeting me and yet the women in the store were watching. I turned my back to them, but I could feel them standing behind me,

holding a can or a half-filled bag of cookies or a head of lettuce, not willing to move until I had gone out through the door again and the wave of talk began and they were swept back into their own lives. Mrs Donell was back there somewhere; I had seen her as I came in, and I wondered as I had before if she came on purpose when she knew I was coming, because she always tried to say something; she was one of the few who spoke.

'A roasting chicken,' I said to Mr Elbert, and across the store his greedy wife opened the refrigerated case and took out a chicken and began to wrap it. 'A small leg of lamb,' I said, 'my Uncle Julian always fancies a roasted lamb in the first spring days.' I should not have said it, I knew, and a little gasp went around the store like a scream. I could make them run like rabbits, I thought, if I said to them what I really wanted to, but they would only gather again outside and watch for me there. 'Onions,' I said politely to Mr Elbert, 'coffee, bread, flour. Walnuts,' I said, 'and sugar; we are very low on sugar.' Somewhere behind me there was a little horrified laugh, and Mr Elbert glanced past me, briefly, and then to the items he was arranging on the counter. In a minute Mrs Elbert would bring my chicken and my meat, wrapped, and set them down by the other things; I need not turn around until I was ready to go. 'Two quarts of milk,' I said. 'A half pint of cream, a pound of butter.' The Harries had stopped delivering dairy goods to us six years ago and I brought milk and butter home from the grocery now. 'And a dozen eggs.' Constance had forgotten to put eggs on the list, but there had been only two at home. 'A box of peanut brittle,' I said; Uncle Julian would clatter and crunch over his papers tonight, and go to bed sticky.

'The Blackwoods always did set a fine table.' That was Mrs Donell, speaking clearly from somewhere behind me, and someone giggled and someone else said 'Shh.' I never turned; it was enough to feel them all there in back of me without looking into