



P E N G U I N



C L A S S I C S

SHIRLEY JACKSON

DARK TALES



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SHIRLEY JACKSON (1916–1965) received wide critical acclaim for her short story “The Lottery,” which was first published in *The New Yorker* in 1948. Her works available from Penguin Classics include

We Have Always Lived in the Castle, *The Haunting of Hill House*, *Come Along With Me*, *Hangsaman*, *The Bird’s Nest*, and *The Sundial*, as well as *Life Among the Savages* and *Raising Demons* available from Penguin Books.

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Modern Prize in Prose and the Believer Book Award. Her short stories have been published in *The Paris*

Review, *The New Yorker*, and *Granta*, and have earned her a Pushcart Prize, an O. Henry Award, the Plimpton Prize for Fiction, and a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts. Her short story collection, *Homesick for Another World*, was published in January 2017. *Eileen*, her first novel, was shortlisted for the National Book Critics Circle Award, won the PEN/Hemingway Award for debut fiction, and was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize.

SHIRLEY JACKSON

Dark Tales

Foreword by

OTTESSA MOSHFEGH

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Foreword

On three separate occasions, I stood within feet of people I knew intimately—one a best friend since adolescence, one a former lover, and one a member of my family—and I did not recognize them. Rosie who lives in Massachusetts suddenly appeared at a reading I was giving in California, and I thought, “Why is that girl staring at me like that?” A man I had lived with once in Brooklyn sat across from me in a coffee shop in LA, and all I could think was, “He’s strangely attractive.” A green-eyed woman in a silk scarf approached me at the Port Authority Bus Terminal and said my name, smiling. I looked at her and thought, “My mother is at least two inches taller than that woman,” then turned and kept searching for her face in the crowd. There is a peculiar malfunction in the brain, I think, when something deeply familiar appears in a strange context. And in fiction, this malfunction can turn into a ride through a new dimension of possibility. A character’s misperceptions can actually transform her world: paranoia is no longer a state of mind. The conspiracy is real: the girl at my reading isn’t Rosie at all, but a doppelgänger sent to make me lose my mind in a public forum; the man in the coffee shop and I fall in love again, and all the while I’m afraid to let on that I think I know him from before—he looks just like Jeremy, talks just like him, but says his name is Andrew. Maybe I’m crazy, and some evil spirit has taken the place of my mother—swapped bodies with her on the Greyhound bus, perhaps. Here she comes, this strange lady in a scarf, to taunt and beguile me, and to steal my soul.

After reading *Dark Tales*, I think of these occasions of failed recognition as Shirley Jackson moments. In each story in this collection, the everyday

world becomes tinted with an odd sheen of terror. My faith in the consistency of day-to-day life wanes as I read. Though Jackson often starts off rather benignly—her characters are never panicked from the get-go, but snake their way into states of dismay—she has a mystifying knack for illustrating the horrifying uncertainties around the basic laws of reality. Am I alone in doubting that things aren't always what they seem? Upon awakening, I often ask myself, "Who am I? Where am I? What am I doing here?" and from time to time, I've felt that the answers were merely memorized responses, and that my reality might be an arbitrary dash of the imagination—believable, sure, but not entirely trustworthy. This specific vulnerability—of the conscious, willful mind—is precisely what Jackson titillates and exacerbates in her stories. Identity, in particular, becomes flimsy and uncertain in her hands. In "The Beautiful Stranger," for example, a man returns from a business trip, but is not quite sly enough to convince his wife that he's the same person he was before he left. Similarly, in "Louisa, Please Come Home," a runaway returns to her family after years living under an assumed name, but her parents have been so disabused by the fantasy of her return that they don't recognize her. "What is your name, dear?" her mother asks her. It's not quite a case of mistaken identity, but the cruel perversion of perception and memory under duress. Don't be hypnotized by the sanctity of the superficial rhythm of humdrum life, Jackson warns, for under the surface of things, people change, sometimes irrevocably, and yet they may appear unaltered.

At other times, Jackson seems to be writing about the illusory trick of fiction itself. In "The Bus," a woman's complaint to her bus driver prompts him to leave her stranded at night on an empty road. Her misadventures in search of safety and sanity take the reader on a surreal exploration of what might be just a slip of dark reverie, a bad dream as she's dozing off in her

seat—she did take a sleeping pill before she boarded the bus, after all. Or, we wonder, is she actually trapped on a circuitous passage around the hell of her own grumpy psyche? Is the story real, or a parable for her frailty as an aging curmudgeon riding toward death? It's often unclear in these stories whether the eerie peaks and turns are happening in the mind or in actuality. Either way, the experience of existential insecurity is very exciting as a reader. And it seems, too, that Jackson's characters are in on the game—one's mind always operates in the hypothetical. Fiction and fact are only delineated in the present moment. In "What a Thought," a housewife sits reading a boring book and fantasizes bashing in her husband's head with a glass ashtray. Shocked by her own violent vision, she reels into reasons to not kill him, as though to convince herself not to do it: "What would I do without him? she wondered. How would I live, who would ever marry me, where would I go?" And the next moment, Jackson delivers this bit of fascinating science from the would-be murderer's point of view:

They say if you soak a cigarette in water overnight the water will be almost pure nicotine by morning, and deadly poisonous. You can put it in coffee and it won't taste.

"Shall I make *you* some coffee?"

Jackson's narrators are not freaks or psychopaths, but actually very sane people—selfpossessed, observant, and highly logical. In "Family Treasures," for instance, an orphaned young woman in a college dormitory systematically pilfers cherished objects from her housemates, then uses her status as a heartbroken stray to manipulate the search for the thief in every misdirection. There's a lavishness of reason in that story—I don't think it's any coincidence: clarity is truly terrifying—but there is also a perversion of sense through the narrator's self-talk and doubt and analysis. The mind runs, and its course is often rife with pitfalls. In "Paranoia," a man leaving his office

for the day debates with himself about what method of transportation he ought to take to get home in time to have dinner with his wife for her birthday. The mundane anxiety over his commute mounts. As his mind swirls, his senses betray him, and he comes to believe that he is being followed by a stranger in a light hat all around the city. He evades the man in fumbling swoops via bus, taxi, subway, and on foot through the bustling streets of Manhattan, a menace on every corner. But is it the same man in a light hat that he keeps running into? It seems impossible. The protagonist has clearly lost his mind. But by the end of the story, his delusion has superseded his suspicion and becomes the truth in the fiction: the man gets home and his wife is in on the conspiracy to capture him— why? We don't know. She pretends to go to the next room to make him a drink and calls someone on the phone—the man in the light hat, we suppose. “I've got him,” she says. It's terrifying.

*

And so Jackson asks: Dear reader, have you, too, lost your mind? Can you ever be sure you had one to lose in the first place? Have you ever mistaken the mew of a cat in heat for someone being murdered? Have you ever thought you saw your own self waiting at the crosswalk as you drive past in your car? Do you trust your own perceptions? And how far will you walk down a road at night before the wind at your back feels like the hands of a madman pushing you forward? Will you run? How fast? And whose door will you knock on? Everything looks perfectly normal as you rush up the front steps, and maybe you've just been spooked, maybe you're just being silly. In

Jackson's world, the safe house is a trap. Enter it, and you might get lost in the dark.

OTTESSA MOSHFEGH

The Possibility of Evil

Miss Adela Strangeworth stepped daintily along Main Street on her way to the grocery. The sun was shining, the air was fresh and clear after the night's heavy rain, and everything in Miss Strangeworth's little town looked washed and bright. Miss

Strangeworth took deep breaths, and thought that there was nothing in the world like a fragrant summer day.

She knew everyone in town, of course; she was fond of telling strangers—tourists who sometimes passed through the town and stopped to admire Miss Strangeworth's roses—that she had never spent more than a day outside this town in all her long life. She was seventy-one, Miss Strangeworth told the tourists, with a pretty little dimple showing by her lip, and she sometimes found herself thinking that the town belonged to her. “My grandfather built the first house on Pleasant Street,” she would say, opening her blue eyes wide with the wonder of it. “This house, right here. My family has lived here for better than a hundred years. My grandmother planted these roses, and my mother tended them, just as I do. I've watched my town grow; I can remember when Mr. Lewis, Senior, opened the grocery store, and the year the river flooded out the shanties on the low road, and the excitement when some young folks wanted to move the park over to the space in front of where the new post office is today. They wanted to put up a statue of Ethan Allen”—Miss Strangeworth would frown a little and sound stern—“but it should have been a statue of my grandfather. There wouldn't have

been a town here at all if it hadn't been for my grandfather and the lumber mill."

Miss Strangeworth never gave away any of her roses, although the tourists often asked her. The roses belonged on Pleasant Street, and it bothered Miss Strangeworth to think of people wanting to carry them away, to take them into strange towns and down strange streets. When the new minister came, and the ladies were gathering flowers to decorate the church, Miss Strangeworth sent over a great basket of gladioli; when she picked the roses at all, she set them in bowls and vases around the inside of the house her grandfather had built.

Walking down Main Street on a summer morning, Miss Strangeworth had to stop every minute or so to say good morning to someone or to ask after someone's health. When she came into the grocery, half a dozen people turned away from the shelves and the counters to wave at her or call out good morning.

"And good morning to you, too, Mr. Lewis," Miss Strangeworth said at last. The Lewis family had been in the town almost as long as the Strangeworths; but the day young Lewis left high school and went to work in the grocery, Miss Strangeworth had stopped calling him Tommy and started calling him Mr. Lewis, and he had stopped calling her Addie and started calling her Miss Strangeworth. They had been in high school together, and had gone to picnics together, and to high school dances and basketball games; but now Mr. Lewis was behind the counter in the grocery, and Miss Strangeworth was living alone in the Strangeworth House on Pleasant Street.

"Good morning," Mr. Lewis said, and added politely, "lovely day."

“It is a very nice day,” Miss Strangeworth said as though she had only just decided that it would do after all. “I would like a chop, please, Mr. Lewis, a small, lean veal chop.

Are those strawberries from Arthur Parker’s garden? They’re early this year.” “He brought them in this morning,” Mr. Lewis said.

“I shall have a box,” Miss Strangeworth said. Mr. Lewis looked worried, she thought, and for a minute she hesitated, but then she decided that he surely could not be worried over the strawberries. He looked very tired indeed. He was usually so chipper, Miss Strangeworth thought, and almost commented, but it was far too personal a subject to be introduced to Mr. Lewis, the grocer, so she only said, “And a can of cat food and, I think, a tomato.”

Silently, Mr. Lewis assembled her order on the counter and waited. Miss Strangeworth looked at him curiously and then said, “It’s Tuesday, Mr. Lewis. You forgot to remind me.”

“Did I? Sorry.”

“Imagine your forgetting that I always buy my tea on Tuesday,” Miss Strangeworth said gently. “A quarter-pound of tea, please, Mr. Lewis.”

“Is that all, Miss Strangeworth?”

“Yes, thank you, Mr. Lewis. Such a lovely day, isn’t it?”

“Lovely,” Mr. Lewis said.

Miss Strangeworth moved slightly to make room for Mrs. Harper at the counter. “Morning, Adela,” Mrs. Harper said, and Miss Strangeworth said, “Good morning, Martha.”

“Lovely day,” Mrs. Harper said, and Miss Strangeworth said, “Yes, lovely,” and Mr.

Lewis, under Mrs. Harper's glance, nodded.

"Ran out of sugar for my cake frosting," Mrs. Harper explained. Her hand shook slightly as she opened her pocketbook. Miss Strangeworth wondered, glancing at her quickly, if she had been taking proper care of herself. Martha Harper was not as young as she used to be, Miss Strangeworth thought. She probably could use a good, strong tonic.

"Martha," she said, "you don't look well."

"I'm perfectly all right," Mrs. Harper said shortly. She handed her money to Mr. Lewis, took her change and her sugar, and went out without speaking again. Looking after her, Miss Strangeworth shook her head slightly. Martha definitely did *not* look well.

Carrying her little bag of groceries, Miss Strangeworth came out of the store into the bright sunlight and stopped to smile down on the Crane baby. Don and Helen Crane were really the two most infatuated young parents she had ever known, she thought indulgently, looking at the delicately embroidered baby cap and the lace-edged carriage cover.

"That little girl is going to grow up expecting luxury all her life," she said to Helen Crane.

Helen laughed. "That's the way we want her to feel," she said. "Like a princess."

"A princess can be a lot of trouble sometimes," Miss Strangeworth said dryly. "How old is her highness now?"

"Six months next Tuesday," Helen Crane said, looking down with rapt wonder at her child. "I've been worrying, though, about her. Don't you think she ought to move around more? Try to sit up, for instance?"

"For plain and fancy worrying," Miss Strangeworth said, amused, "give me a new mother every time."

“She just seems—slow,” Helen Crane said.

“Nonsense. All babies are different. Some of them develop much more quickly than others.”

“That’s what my mother says.” Helen Crane laughed, looking a little bit ashamed.

“I suppose you’ve got young Don all upset about the fact that his daughter is already six months old and hasn’t yet begun to learn to dance?”

“I haven’t mentioned it to him. I suppose she’s just so precious that I worry about her all the time.”

“Well, apologize to her right now,” Miss Strangeworth said. “*She* is probably worrying about why you keep jumping around all the time.” Smiling to herself and shaking her old head, she went on down the sunny street, stopping once to ask little Billy Moore why he wasn’t out riding in his daddy’s shiny new car, and talking for a few minutes outside the library with Miss Chandler, the librarian, about the new novels to be ordered, and paid for by the annual library appropriation. Miss Chandler seemed absentminded and very much as though she was thinking about something else. Miss Strangeworth noticed that Miss Chandler had not taken much trouble with her hair that morning, and sighed. Miss Strangeworth hated sloppiness.

Many people seemed disturbed recently, Miss Strangeworth thought. Only yesterday the Stewarts’ fifteen-year-old Linda had run crying down her own front walk and all the way to school, not caring who saw her. People around town thought she might have had a fight with the Harris boy, but they showed up together at the soda shop after school as usual, both of them looking grim and bleak. Trouble at home, people concluded, and sighed over the problems of trying to raise kids right these days.

From halfway down the block Miss Strangeworth could catch the heavy accent of her roses, and she moved a little more quickly. The perfume of roses meant home, and home meant the Strangeworth House on Pleasant Street. Miss Strangeworth stopped at her own front gate, as she always did, and looked with deep pleasure at her house, with the red and pink and white roses massed along the narrow lawn, and the rambler going up along the porch; and the neat, the unbelievably trim lines of the house itself, with its slimness and its washed white look. Every window sparkled, every curtain hung stiff and straight, and even the stones of the front walk were swept and clear. People around town wondered how old Miss Strangeworth managed to keep the house looking the way it did, and there was a legend about a tourist once mistaking it for the local museum and going all through the place without finding out about his mistake. But the town was proud of Miss Strangeworth and her roses and her house. They had all grown together. Miss Strangeworth went up her front steps, unlocked her front door with her key, and went into the kitchen to put away her groceries. She debated having a cup of tea and then decided that it was too close to midday dinnertime; she would not have the appetite for her little chop if she had tea now. Instead she went into the light, lovely sitting room, which still glowed from the hands of her mother and her grandmother, who had covered the chairs with bright chintz and hung the curtains. All the furniture was spare and shining, and the round hooked rugs on the floor had been the work of Miss Strangeworth's grandmother and her mother. Miss Strangeworth had put a bowl of her red roses on the low table before the window, and the room was full of their scent.

Miss Strangeworth went to the narrow desk in the corner, and unlocked it with her key. She never knew when she might feel like writing letters, so she

kept her notepaper inside, and the desk locked. Miss Strangeworth's usual stationery was heavy and creamcolored, with "Strangeworth House" engraved across the top, but, when she felt like writing her other letters, Miss Strangeworth used a pad of various-colored paper, bought from the local newspaper shop. It was almost a town joke, that colored paper, layered in pink and green and blue and yellow; everyone in town bought it and used it for odd, informal notes and shopping lists. It was usual to remark, upon receiving a note written on a blue page, that so-and-so would be needing a new pad soon—here she was, down to the blue already. Everyone used the matching envelopes for tucking away recipes, or keeping odd little things in, or even to hold cookies in the school lunch boxes. Mr. Lewis sometimes gave them to the children for carrying home penny candy.

Although Miss Strangeworth's desk held a trimmed quill pen, which had belonged to her grandfather, and a gold-frost fountain pen, which had belonged to her father, Miss Strangeworth always used a dull stub of pencil when she wrote her letters, and she printed them in a childish block print. After thinking for a minute, although she had been phrasing the letter in the back of her mind all the way home, she wrote on a pink sheet: *Didn't you ever see an idiot child before? Some people just shouldn't have children, should they?*

She was pleased with the letter. She was fond of doing things exactly right. When she made a mistake, as she sometimes did, or when the letters were not spaced nicely on the page, she had to take the discarded page to the kitchen stove and burn it at once. Miss Strangeworth never delayed when things had to be done.

After thinking for a minute, she decided that she would like to write another letter, perhaps to go to Mrs. Harper, to follow up the ones she had

already mailed. She selected a green sheet this time and wrote quickly: *Have you found out yet what they were all laughing about after you left the bridge club on Thursday? Or is the wife really always the last one to know?*

Miss Strangeworth never concerned herself with facts; her letters all dealt with the more negotiable stuff of suspicion. Mr. Lewis would never have imagined for a minute that his grandson might be lifting petty cash from the store register if he had not had one of Miss Strangeworth's letters. Miss Chandler, the librarian, and Linda Stewart's parents would have gone unsuspectingly ahead with their lives, never aware of possible evil lurking nearby, if Miss Strangeworth had not sent letters to open their eyes. Miss Strangeworth would have been genuinely shocked if there *had* been anything between Linda Stewart and the Harris boy, but, as long as evil existed unchecked in the world, it was Miss Strangeworth's duty to keep her town alert to it. It was far more sensible for Miss Chandler to wonder what Mr. Shelley's first wife had really died of than to take a chance on not knowing. There were so many wicked people in the world and only one Strangeworth left in town. Besides, Miss Strangeworth liked writing her letters.

She addressed an envelope to Don Crane after a moment's thought, wondering curiously if he would show the letter to his wife, and using a pink envelope to match the pink paper. Then she addressed a second envelope, green, to Mrs. Harper. Then an idea came to her and she selected a blue sheet and wrote: *You never know about doctors. Remember they're only human and need money like the rest of us. Suppose the knife slipped accidentally. Would Doctor Burns get his fee and a little extra from that nephew of yours?*

She addressed the blue envelope to old Mrs. Foster, who was having an operation next month. She had thought of writing one more letter, to the head of the school board, asking how a chemistry teacher like Billy Moore's

father could afford a new convertible, but all at once she was tired of writing letters. The three she had done would do for one day. She could write more tomorrow; it was not as though they all had to be done at once.

She had been writing her letters—sometimes two or three every day for a week, sometimes no more than one in a month—for the past year. She never got any answers, of course, because she never signed her name. If she had been asked, she would have said that her name, Adela Strangeworth, a name honored in the town for so many years, did not belong on such trash. The town where she lived had to be kept clean and sweet, but people everywhere were lustful and evil and degraded, and needed to be watched; the world was so large, and there was only one Strangeworth left in it. Miss Strangeworth sighed, locked her desk, and put the letters into her big, black leather pocketbook, to be mailed when she took her evening walk.

She broiled her little chop nicely, and had a sliced tomato and good cup of tea ready when she sat down to her midday dinner at the table in her dining room, which could be opened to seat twenty-two, with a second table, if necessary, in the hall. Sitting in the warm sunlight that came through the tall windows of the dining room, seeing her roses massed outside, handling the heavy, old silverware and the fine, translucent china, Miss Strangeworth was pleased; she would not have cared to be doing anything else. People must live graciously, after all, she thought, and sipped her tea. Afterward, when her plate and cup and saucer were washed and dried and put back onto the shelves where they belonged, and her silverware was back in the mahogany silver chest, Miss Strangeworth went up the graceful staircase and into her bedroom, which was the front room overlooking the roses, and had been her mother's and her grandmother's. Their Crown Derby dresser set and furs had

been kept here, their fans and silver-backed brushes and their own bowls of roses; Miss Strangeworth kept a bowl of white roses on the bed table.

She drew the shades, took the rose-satin spread from the bed, slipped out of her dress and her shoes, and lay down tiredly. She knew that no doorbell or phone would ring; no one in town would dare to disturb Miss Strangeworth during her afternoon nap. She slept, deep in the rich smell of roses.

After her nap she worked in her garden for a little while, sparing herself because of the heat; then she went in to her supper. She ate asparagus from her own garden, with sweet-butter sauce, and a soft-boiled egg, and, while she had her supper, she listened to a late-evening news broadcast and then to a program of classical music on her small radio. After her dishes were done and her kitchen set in order, she took up her hat—Miss Strangeworth's hats were proverbial in the town; people believed that she had inherited them from her mother and her grandmother—and, locking the front door of her house behind her, set off on her evening walk, pocketbook under her arm. She nodded to Linda Stewart's father, who was washing his car in the pleasantly cool evening. She thought that he looked troubled.

There was only one place in town where she could mail her letters, and that was the new post office, shiny with red brick and silver letters. Although Miss Strangeworth had never given the matter any particular thought, she had always made a point of mailing her letters very secretly; it would, of course, not have been wise to let anyone see her mail them. Consequently, she timed her walk so she could reach the post office just as darkness was starting to dim the outlines of the trees and the shapes of people's faces, although no one could ever mistake Miss Strangeworth, with her dainty walk and her rustling skirts.