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JACK OF DIAMONDS

By Elizabeth Spencer

Viking

"First you're an unknown," Martin Myers once observed, "then you write one book and you move up to obscurity." After almost a dozen books spread over four decades, Elizabeth Spencer still languishes in relative obscurity, and the artistic power of her new story collection, *Jack of Diamonds*, shows this lack of acclaim to be a cruel injustice.

In the five stories presented here, three outstanding long ones, two relatively short yet no less compassionate, Spencer achieves admirable variety. The stories vary in setting from Mississippi to Montreal to Italy, all places the author has lived, and in the ages of their protagonists from teenage to middle age. These central characters, differing in age and voice, are alike in being sensitive and vulnerable but never weak. We find ourselves following their lives with more than usual caring.

Often, they are females alienated from their world because they either cannot understand its rules or they are pulled outside it by a magnetism to other characters that seems itself to constitute what life, for them, is about. In fact, if any one theme dominates these stories, it is the way one person is bound inexplicably but powerfully to another.

When Callie in "Jean-Pierre" is about to marry an ominous French Canadian of whom her family disapproves, her sister asks, "Why didn't you just get rid of him?" to which Callie responds, "You know somehow when someone is permanent in your life. You can marry them or not marry them; they're always there just the same." When after the marriage the husband disappears mysteriously, when she feels he is "somebody she'd met once, somebody she'd married in a dream he hadn't had," Callie remains bound to him even when a more comforting option presents itself in the form of a young man who offers to share her loneliness: "If you're sinking in the ocean, you need somebody to pull you out. But if you're falling through space, a companion in flight is about the best you can hope for."

Rosalind, a teenager in the book's title story, is learning horrible truths about her father and dead mother's marriage. As her old dreams are being torn away, the one boy with whom she feels a connection leaves her home, and she feels "for a moment his look was like a voice, crying out to her from across something. For the first time in her life, Rosalind felt the force that pulls stronger than any other. Just to go with him, to be, even invisibly, near."

Spencer writes prose so smooth you could skate on it, always engaging all the reader's senses. In "The Cousins," a powerfully emotional, poignantly concluded masterpiece of long story form, a young woman tries to console an older cousin she is in love with, then, "He almost laughed, at my youngness, I guess, but then said, 'Ella Mason,' as gently as feathers falling, and came to hold me awhile."

In a courtroom hearing, the narrator of "The Business Venture" observes the black man around whom the story's action largely revolves: "He looked like an assistant university dean. He also had the

look of a spectator, very calm, I thought, not wanting to keep turning around and staring at him, but keeping the image in my mind like an all-day sucker, letting it slowly melt out its meaning." And the writing is frequently laced with wit. The same narrator had a moment earlier observed, "Once when I was visiting a school friend up north . . . a man at a party asked me if I would have sexual relations with a black. He wasn't black himself, so why was he curious?"

Perhaps the most conspicuously "Southern" of this collection's virtues is its strong emphasis on a compelling story line. Once confessing that she emerges from a Deep South background solidly rooted in the Southern oral tradition, Spencer noted, "Story charts in time the heart's aspirations and gives central place to the great human relationships. It shows our experience to us in a form we can understand." As in Peter Taylor's *Summons to Memphis*, the plots often evolve in fragments, like a jigsaw puzzle coming together, the whole picture growing steadily more and more complete. Invariably in this book, Spencer keeps her plots moving in ways that are continually fresh and often surprising, like life, but never gimmicky or false. She is a master of the narrative hook, the line that keeps us reading on. Ella Mason in "The Cousins" grabs us with, "As a way of living, I always told myself, it might have gone on for us, too, right through the present and into an endless future, except for that trip we took that summer.

"It started with ringing phones."

What elevates these stories to high art, though, is the deadly accuracy with which they follow the echoing evocations of human emotion. After a date with the older man she will soon marry in "Jean-Pierre," 20 year-old Callie leaves his car; "The scene just past was a still-spinning disk, and she clung dizzily to its center, thinking, I've never got into things like this before." About to forgo a college romance, Ella Mason notes, "Things were running down with him, even though I didn't want to admit it. I didn't love him so much as I wanted him to love me, and that's no good." Later, with her cousin, Ella says, "We kissed in the dark beneath the lifeboats, and made love once in the cabin while Ben and Jamie were at the movies, but in a furtive way, as if the grown people were at church."

Sometimes Spencer creates a texture of irony as a character reveals a level of feeling she herself does not understand, as Eileen Waybridge does in "The Business Venture," the most Southern of the stories and the one told in the most distinctive voice: "The thing to know about our crowd is that we never did go in for talking about the 'Negro question.' . . . When all the troubles started coming in on us after the Freedom Riders and the Ole Miss riots, we decided not to talk about it. I don't know but what we weren't afraid of getting nervous. . . . But there are always one or two of them that we seriously insist we know--really know--that they love us. Would do anything for us, as we would for them. Otherwise, without that feeling, I guess we couldn't rest easy. You never can really know what they think, what they feel, so there's always the one chance it might be love."

These are well told stories about people at tiptoe stance with the worlds around them, beautifully crafted tales compelling in their grasp of how we feel and act even when we don't know why, stories about people whose marriage is condemned because their first names won't sound right together, women ostracized because they've "gotten too independent," one even to the point where "she thinks she can live her own life."

For years, Elizabeth Spencer the Mississippian has suffered the predictable fate of being cast the dimmer luminary beside Southern stars like William Faulkner, Eudora Welty, Carson McCullers and Flannery O'Connor. The comparison is unwise not only because it reeks of regional prejudice but because it just plain isn't apt. If Spencer bears similarities to other writers, they are to Alice Munro in depth and to fellow Southerners Peter Taylor in sensitivity to the complex layerings of human emotion and Reynolds Price in ability to stir a vast range of psychic chords.

Price once called Elizabeth Spencer "a smiling sybil, unafraid of her news." Spencer's news is how we move through life grabbing some but not all of its possibilities, unraveling some but not all of its mysteries, feeling much of its joy, much of its pain, as we sense our consciousness dawn with how we are yoked inextricably to others for reasons we feel rather than control.