



CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN FICTION



ELIZABETH SPENCER

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a handprint in memory" —*The Philadelphia Inquirer*

JACK OF DIAMONDS



JACK OF DIAMONDS

AND OTHER STORIES BY

**ELIZABETH
SPENCER**



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"Spencer is . . . intensely curious about the things people do, the lies they live and the truths they hide. Her stories are graceful, solidly crafted and honest."

— *Time*

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for their invitation to the Villa Serbelloni, Bellagio, Italy,
where several of these stories were either written or commenced.*

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JACK OF DIAMONDS

Elizabeth Spencer is the author of numerous short-story collections and highly praised novels, including *Fire in the Morning* and *The Light in the Piazza*. She is the recipient of many prizes, including the Rosenthal Award of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, a Guggenheim Fellowship, and the Award of Merit Medal for the Short Story, given by the American Academy of Arts and Letters. She is a member of the American Institute of Arts and Letters. Three of the stories in this collection have been included in editions of the *O. Henry Prize Stories*, and a fourth has appeared in *The Pushcart Prize: Best of the Small Presses*. Currently at work on a new novel, Ms. Spencer lives in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, with her husband.

*For Louis and Eva Rubin
and for Max Steele*

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JEAN-PIERRE

"My father was a car salesman out in N.D.G.," Callie told Monsieur Courtois; then, recognizing that his English was poor, she tried out her French. "*Mon père a vendu des autos à Notre-Dame-de-Grâce.*"

"He died, then?"

"Oh, no, he and his wife left Montreal. They moved to California about a year ago—in 1962. *Maintenant ils demeurent—*"

"I know," he cut her off. "And you stayed."

"My sister's here."

"*Votre soeur est ici,*" he said, perversely switching to French. "*Vous habitez chez elle?*"

"*Je suis seule.*"

"*Vous êtes seule,*" he repeated, and a while later said, "*Pourquoi?*"

But by then she had forgotten the first part, and, being a little wary of him, uncertain, she said, "*Comment?*"

"I said why do you live alone?"

"My sister is married, so . . ."

"You work?"

"Yes, I work."

He did not seem interested enough to ask her where. The Fletchers, who had asked her along to help entertain their friend, came back from across the street; they had gone to see when the movie would start. Jean-Pierre Courtois, the friend (he was actually a business prospect), ordered another round of drinks.

After the movie, they all went to have pizza. Callie watched Monsieur Courtois while he was too intent on eating to look up and find her watching. He was dark, almost swart, with a fleshy face that could, she guessed, go sullen rather easily; his full, smooth mouth stirred with annoyance when he could not part the cheese strings from the pizza without winding them off onto his fork. He stuffed in mouthfuls that were too large, and chewed with first one cheek full, then the other. But his clothes were neat, his tie quiet, and the only thing that really set him off from the English-speaking Fletchers was the slight gleam of artificial gloss on his thick hair, and the gold he wore—cuff links, ring, and tie clip, all very bright. Callie's stepmother, with her querulous voice, would have called him "Mister" Courtois, not "Monsieur," and said that he looked cheap, dismissing him for good and all. O.K., thought Callie, he looks cheap. I've done my duty to Kay and Bob Fletcher. I'll never see him again.

After the movie and the pizza, and after a last drink at the Fletchers' apartment out on Côte-des-Neiges, he drove her home. She lived near Sherbrooke on Saint-Marc, in an old building, ground floor, with a yard behind it. In the arch of the doorway, he stopped her. "You watched me. *Tout le temps*. Why?"

She shook her head, though he was right; she hadn't wondered why. He stepped her into the corner by the door, pressed against the whole of her, and kissed her. "*C'est ça que tu veux?*" he said roughly.

She never answered. She shook so she could hardly get the key into the lock; by the time she did, he was in the car

and about to start it, which she turned back to watch him do. He drove off without a glance. Getting angry as she closed the door, she finally began to speak aloud to herself. "I'm too young for him. I can't speak his damn language. He knows all that." She whammed her bag down on the apartment table. The kiss had been an act of contempt, she thought; she had got that out of it. The French did not like English-speaking people. They did not take them out. He had been contemptuous of the Fletchers' choice for him; Bob's chance of selling him any insurance was gone. They should have asked a French girl for the evening.

Contempt, again, was what she heard in his voice when he phoned her a week later, saying his name so fast she couldn't think who he might be, and she said it was the wrong number, until he told her more clearly. Why did she agree to meet him? She didn't know; she wished she hadn't.

He sat across from her, in a booth in a place that advertised steak from Texas steers, and he looked at her—this time it was she who was watched while eating—and smoked, and asked her questions. Sometimes he was silent. "I like your hair," he told her suddenly. She got angry again, and couldn't eat another bite.

Her hair was pale, fine, and straight. It hung down evenly on either side, and was a little longer in the back, where it dipped down into a V. He must be thirty years old, she thought, and probably married. She did not even try to talk to him. She was still so young, scarcely turned twenty, and given to quietness. Since her mother's death she had endured a bitter family life, prone to fights and festering. She had studied French to get the voices out of her head.

But then she began to think of what the French went through here, treated as inferior by the English, called names they resented (she didn't blame them); they preferred a life unmarred by violating eyes and scarring comments—such regard, such words as her stepmother had gone in for. So,

as she remembered this, her humor improved and she said kindly, "*Merci.*"

"What?"

"I said thank you. For dinner. For saying you liked my hair."

"*Bienvenue,*" he answered. Bad French, she knew, but she let it go.

It was her hair he touched at the door, and this time he came inside to kiss her. Departing, his car made its accustomed skidding noise at the corner. 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.

But then maybe it had to happen sometime, with somebody. And maybe, she thought, it was why she'd stayed on in Montreal alone rather than going to California, why she'd moved out of her sister's house and asked her not to tell their father, for fear of starting all sorts of family worrying and suspicions—those quarrels now grown silent.

That was in May. In June, she married him.

Her sister had her out to Notre-Dame-de-Grâce when she heard the plan, and sat her down at the kitchen table with coffee in a ceramic mug covered with yellow daisies. "You can't do this, Callie. He's one of those awful Quebec people. They left France so long ago nobody there knows they exist. We met somebody from Paris the other day who still couldn't understand a word of their French after two weeks here. You'll wind up with fifteen brats and not even good French. Why didn't you just get rid of him?"

"You know somehow," said Callie, "when someone is permanent in your life. You can marry them or not marry them; they're always there just the same."

"That's the most childish thing I ever heard of," her sister said. "Unless you've got in trouble and won't tell me."

Her sister's name was Beatrice, but she cultivated an En-

glish tone and liked people to call her Bea. To save Callie from defending herself against the charge of childishness—or not defending herself—the phone rang. It was Bart, her brother-in-law, wanting to speak to her.

"I knew Bea was going to talk to you today, but I don't know if she'll tell you what I said. In my opinion, I think you don't believe any of us loves you, Callie. Well, whatever you think, that's not true. We do love you."

"Thank you," she said.

"Will you just remember that one thing? We love you."

She said she would remember.

"And then," said Bea when Callie returned to the table, "there's your social life, for instance. What kind of husband image is he going to be? Bart and I make an impression, I know that. Even our names go together—you have to think of everything. But 'Jean-Pierre and Callie,' how does that sound?"

"Terrible," said Callie.

"And then the financial side. At least, you must have talked it over."

"He makes a good living. He told me so."

"He owns property—"

"He owns two apartment houses," said Callie, though she knew Bea had informed herself of that already, just by the way she stopped. "They're out in East Montreal."

"Have you seen them?"

"No, have you?"

"Don't be ridiculous," said Bea. "Of course not. Why would I go there? Nobody lives over there but—oh, you know, plumbers." She always doubted whether Callie ate enough, and whacked off a wedge of coffee cake for her now.

"They must exist," said Callie, "because Bob Fletcher wanted to sell him insurance for them."

"What did Bart want?" asked Bea.

"He said he thought I thought you didn't love me."

"That's ridiculous," said Bea. "Why do you think I wanted to talk to you?"

"I don't know," said Callie.

"You'll never see his money," said Bea. "I'm certain of that."

"I guess he'll buy the groceries," said Callie, getting stubborn. She had not, to tell the truth, discussed finances. She had found out the simplest way—by going there when invited—that his apartment was in midtown, and that he could afford anything he wanted; he didn't have to think twice.

To Callie, the real question was not why she wanted to marry Jean-Pierre, with whom she felt she belonged, but why he wanted to marry her—this English-speaking girl, so much younger, with nothing to offer him. Because he liked her, he said. His first wife had died. The family had blamed him. He brought the confidence out reluctantly, like information it was dangerous to share. It seemed he had got a bad name in the French community—the strict side of it. He could move into other French circles, but they would find out eventually. Besides, since he was Catholic, Callie was never sure that he thought he was really marrying her, in the final, true sense, at all. They had a ceremony in the office of a French Protestant church, down in the shadow of the Pont Jacques-Cartier. There were some dusty green textbooks on theology on glass-fronted shelves; a desk, a lectern, and a rug worn colorless. The witnesses were Jean-Pierre's uncle and Callie's former landlady, who left soon after—she had an appointment. Bea and Bart were away, she supposed because they disapproved. They had invited her and Jean-Pierre to dinner at the Beaver Club before they left, and given them a Waterford fruit bowl and a check. But their absence stung her, even though the excuse was plausible; Bart had an interview for a high position in a Cincinnati brokerage firm, and it could not be postponed.

Jean-Pierre gave a wedding luncheon for some of his friends, relatives, and business connections and their wives, girlfriends, and mistresses. One even brought along a cousin of his own. Jean-Pierre smoked a lot and paid Callie little notice. "Died of blood poisoning in the hospital," she overheard him saying at one point. "She got it there. In the hospital. Some doctor her family knew. Why blame me? I wasn't with her every hour, every minute. I had to keep food on the table. What they said was 'But did you have to be in Quebec City?' 'I was where I had to be,' I said, 'even if it was Miami, Florida.' "

He went on in French to another man: "Stay out of hospitals—the best thing is take care of yourself. . . . Her mother never talked to me again. 'Look, Madame,' I told her, 'you lost your daughter, but me, I lost my wife. Which is worse?' 'She lived with me all those years,' she says. 'That's a stupid question.' 'O.K.,' I told her, 'but you have to admit it's a stupid idea to think I killed her.' 'Where were you when she died?'—she must have said that a hundred times. If she were here right now, she'd be saying that—'Where were you when my daughter died?' My God, those women . . . Big, strong . . . She'd cry; O.K., you'd expect that, but every tear so fat and swollen! That's enough. Let's drop it."

From across the table, a friend, perhaps another uncle, raised a champagne glass and clinked it with Jean-Pierre's. He lit a cigar. They had yet to drink to her. In fact, they never did, though in parting they all kissed her hand. "*Bonne chance*," they kept saying. "*Merci*," she said. They assumed she knew no French. Yet she understood them well enough. Alone with Jean-Pierre, she spoke to him in his language.

They drove over the border to Burlington for the weekend, ate at a good restaurant, went to the Holiday Inn, and everything was the same as ever. For some reason, they cared about each other. He said that it would be *une union heureuse et éternelle*—she would see.

Jean-Pierre had thick dark hair, darker than most of his