

Topography of Love: Stories. Bernice Morgan.

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MERNA SUMMERS

"VAIN DECEIT," which is included in the short story collection *Topography of Love*, was the first story of Bernice Morgan's that I ever read. It was a few years ago when I was planning to spend some time in Newfoundland and a friend there sent me a copy of the literary magazine, *TickleAce*. The story knocked the socks off me, and I was delighted when I arrived in St. John's to discover that the library in my rented house included Morgan's two novels, *Random Passage* and *Waiting for Time*.

If there is such a thing as love at first sight (and second, and third), this was what I felt on encountering the work of Bernice Morgan. And I am happy to report that *Topography of Love* continues the enchantment.

"Vain Deceit" is still one of the knock-outs of the collection. It is a story that looks back to the days of the Second World War, when Kate, an attractive and life-loving young woman, marries a rough-mouthed brute of a man after her boyfriend is killed overseas. What she does on the last day of the war, besides shocking the reader, will cast a shadow over several other stories in the collection, stories which either return to Kate or are told from the viewpoint of characters whose lives touch hers.

"Cautionary Tales" shows Kate as an older woman, still with a zest for new experiences, and still married to the same brute of a husband. Kate's story here is told in counterpoint to a story of the assassination of the Russian royal family and the servant girl who died with them when she could have fled. It raises the question of why human beings do not find a way of escaping from intolerable arrangements.

"Cautionary Tales" is narrated by Kate's niece, Sarah, whom we have already met in "Poems in a Cold Climate," a little gem of a story that manages to capture perfectly the despair that even the generous-spirited can sometimes feel on encountering someone who appears to lead a charmed life.

I am not going to attempt to trace all the connections between the various stories. In the first place, every story in this collection is perfectly capable of standing on its own. In the second, it is part of the reader's pleasure to puzzle out these connections, to realize suddenly that this character must be that character's mother, or son, or former lover, and to be amazed by the long trajectory of cause and effect.

Morgan is interested in the power that simple *wanting* has in individual human lives. One is amazed sometimes at her characters' appetite for life and new experiences, and saddened by how little some of them have to settle for. In "Moments of Grace," the reader meets Dot and Beryl, two Newfoundland women on holiday in California. This may be the only holiday these two women will ever have, and they find themselves spending most of it sitting in parking lots while their hostess, a long-ago friend, attends to her own financial affairs. Beryl, who has always thought of Dot as cocky and confident, discovers on this trip that Dot's husband has, as Dot puts it, "beat the bejesus out of me every Saturday night." Several of Morgan's stories involve brutal men and the women who love them or more often, like Dot, "grit me teeth and stick it out." There is a strong sense of the pain of lost youth in this story, and one comes to admire the characters, who are good at making small pleasures go a long way, of seizing the day. We see how a chance occurrence can turn disaccord into camaraderie and disaster into transcendent happiness.

In "Not a Face You Know," a young girl runs off to Labrador City with her boyfriend, only to discover that he has it in him to be a killer. "To the Promised Land" depicts a young woman with a talent for getting other people to do things for her, and the young man who is her victim.

Older characters often carry a weight of past sadnesses. Celia in "A Commission in Lunacy" has spent a good part of her life "in the mental," and her treatments have destroyed her memory. What finally gives meaning to her life is discovering the institution's archives, where she spends long days searching for her own past and the events which led to her being where she is today.

The interlocking of the related stories in this collection is unobtrusive. It would be possible to miss the connections if you read the stories not all at once, but spaced out over time. The reading would still be a rich experience given the quality of the writing, but it would not be as complete as reading them together and feeling the resonances between them. There are stories behind the stories on the pages, and these have particular power.

"Imaginary Doorways," the last story in the collection, introduces Celia's daughter, Floss, who has been keeping company for several years with a man who

is, she feels, several classes above her. The story takes place on the day when she may or may not break away from her rather humdrum life to take up a new and richer one. It is this story that gives us hope that once in awhile and in spite of great odds, the most unlikely people do find the courage to break free from the past and make new beginnings.