

International Spies

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“Where are you from?” someone asks. I list off the cities I have lived in with the diligence of a child reciting her address.

“Confusing,” they say. “Are your parents international spies?”

My dad laughs off the accusation with the ease of a trained professional. How can you be a spy if you have no country?

“Where are you really from?” they insist. I have just told them I am French, because I am a punk, because I hate this question, but my accent has left me susceptible to detection. Actually, the question they have asked is: *Quel est ton origine?* What are your ethnic origins?

I promise you that this is not a comic book origin story. I’ve learned from a young age to distrust the myth of one’s origins. This is a story about espionage. Nothing more.

My dad left home when he was eighteen to move to Italy with his sister. Their move was an escape disguised as an extended vacation. They posed as students at an Italian language school, fulfilling their bourgeois rite of passage as well-to-do Sarajevans sometimes did. If anyone questioned them, they were simply tourists. They might have even believed it themselves. I haven’t asked.

“Don’t turn everything into a romance,” my dad might say if he knew what I was writing. But isn’t there something romantic about the figure of the spy—a man acting out of a blind love for his country?

My father and his sister, international spies, running through agency money, wire HQ for more, as they splurge on pungent designer perfumes until reality hit with full force or their funds ran out for good. On the other end of the line, M, dissolving the agency at top speed, promising to send transfers, gathering the classified files of their lives in her arms.

James Bond, Umberto Eco tells us, nearly suffers a nervous breakdown in *Casino Royale* when confronted with the moral ambiguity of his work. How can he be sure that his is the just cause?

For my college application essay, I write about my anger and hatred towards my French classmates. An older woman who has volunteered to read our essays urges me to soften my language. This makes me cry. She apologizes again and again.

There is a part of me still trapped in a fifteen year old ghost-girl version of myself. In my writing, I am compelled to return to the site of my first haunting over and over again.

An origin story.

In French your *origine* means your ethnicity. More so, it is a way of drawing a line between who is French and who isn't.

I have a laminated booklet with a picture of my face on its front cover and a schedule I have glued onto the back. I pull out my booklet every morning as I run towards the iron door of my school. Below my name reads, “3e3 NF:” *troisième* for the French equivalent of ninth

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grade, *trois* for my section, and NF to mean non-francophone, which denotes a person who does not speak French. In France, immigrants are defined negatively, by our lack.

The *classe troisième* is divided into a *classe non-francophone* and a *classe normale*.

The *Bond villain, Le Chiffre*, names himself for the numbers on a stateless passport issued to him at the close of the Second World War. “I am only a number on a passport,” he says.

I've seen a series of portraits of my dad's family dating from around the time of their departure. Each is rectangular and thumb-sized with a blue backdrop. My aunt is caught laughing at a private joke. It hits too close to its mark to be spoken aloud. My dad leans toward the aperture in anticipation of the flash. He dons his fake Lacoste with real glamour. My grandmother's dark hair is pulled back to show off a pair of heavy pearl earrings. There is a gravity in her face that deepens her beauty, which might also be tiredness. I imagine that these jagged portraits are cast-offs. Their uneven edges betray the places where they have been cut away to be sent to passport agencies or close friends. The agencies are now defunct; the friends have been lost or misplaced like so many invalid passports.

My dad likes to tell this joke, which is not really a joke. He says, “Your great-grandma lived in four different countries without ever having to move.” When I retell this anecdote in a tone of complete sincerity, he mocks me for missing the point.

In elementary school, my mom often took me to the public library to flip through the glossy pages of DK Eyewitness books. My favorite of

the series was the one called SPY. In it, I read about a device that allowed you to hear through walls. I wanted to be able to hear through walls, to hear what wasn't meant for me.

A silence hangs over the subject of the war. I have no choice but to fill this silence with my own conjecture. If I were to ask my dad for specifics, he might become suspicious. My made-up stories have the too-smooth texture of a lie.

I devise an elaborate means of escaping from my classe non-francophone. I learn to wait until my classmates pool at the middle school entrance so that I can slip through undetected. I flash my schedule at the impatient gardien, hoping the laminate might catch the light of the fluorescent bulbs long enough for him to push me through. My non-francophone classmates and I wait out the rest of of the class period in a small park adjacent to a church where they light their cigarettes and we invent Bond-like nicknames for our francophone classmates. We have difficulty remembering their hyphenated names, their double names.

Casino Royale, Bond's origin story, ends with his colleague, Matthis, dragging him back into the realm of moral absolutes. Matthis. Eco argues, dissolves Bond's ethical dilemma by reminding that he is a machine. He tells him: "Surround yourself with human beings, my dear James ... But don't let me down and become human yourself. We would lose such a wonderful machine." From this point on, Bond hardens into cold externality: his moral center exchanged for a singular purpose.

My non-francophone class is given the choice to appear in two class photographs: our own and that of the classe normale. I sit on a bench while

the classe normale takes its photo, hiding my face in a copy of *Ghost World*. "Why didn't you take the photo with us?" my non-francophone classmate asks.

We have difficulty remembering our double identities, where our allegiances should lie.

You. Me. Same, my dad says. If that were the case, I think, I wouldn't need to hear through walls. The walls of his memory don't let me to hear around their corners.

I can no longer remember the reasons for my hatred, my singular purpose long abandoned.

Around the time of my visits to the public library, my parents buy me a spy kit. It contains a set of purple walkie-talkies, a pen with invisible ink and a listening device. I run to the other room, shouting excitedly at my parents to keep talking. When I bring the headset to my ears, angling the satellite-shaped disc towards the door, their fragmented voices float toward me like ghosts.



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