FLASH FICTION

Double Identity

by Annick Duignan



"Collage 1" by Kacie Finnegan

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My name is Katell, or so I thought for the first 5 years of my life, when my world was French, despite the fact that we lived on Valentine Avenue in the Bronx. I remember visiting the Botanical Gardens and Orchard Beach, shopping on the Grand Concourse, and watching soccer games in Central Park, all in French, until my first day of kindergarten.

I held my mother's hand tightly as we climbed up the winding staircase to the office of Our Lady of Mercy elementary school. We met a woman in all black with rosaries that clacked as she walked. She spoke quietly with my mom, smiled at me and took my hand. I looked back at my mom to make sure it was ok, but she was gone. I searched frantically for her face in the hallway, when I felt a strong pull on my arm and found myself in a classroom with twenty-five other five year olds, dressed just like me, lined up along the perimeter of the room. I was turned over to a woman with dark, piercing eyes. She was also dressed in black. She was speaking to me but I could not understand. She pushed me along the back of the room with the other students and began calling out names and pointing to the seat where each student should sit. Finally, I was the only one standing in the back of the room as she repeated the words Katherine Le Coz. I stood there, shaking as she walked toward me with her pinched face. She pushed me into the last remaining seat, shaking her head. And so it began. My double life.

It turns out my legal name is Katherine. The Catholic Church would not recognize the name Katell as a Saint's name in 1953 and so my Mother named me Katherine. The Ursuline Nuns who ran the school would only call me by my legal name and so I became Katherine.

I learned a lot of things in kindergarten, but the main thing I remember is that I was different from everyone else. I remember too how uncomfortable that felt and how determined I was to fit into the American world.

Katherine learned English, played hopscotch, sang Beatle songs, and ate peanut butter and jelly sandwiches with her friends for lunch. Katell answered the phone with "Allo," ate crème caramel, danced to accordion music at family parties, and knew every Édith Piaf song by heart. I learned how to navigate my French and Americanness and fit into both worlds. It worked really well as long as my worlds stayed separate. I was able to keep it that way for a long time. My American friends knew I was French, and my French family knew we were American, but I made it easy for everyone by becoming who they needed me to be, until Connor.

I met Connor when I was 19 and he rocked my American world. He saw past the hard shell I had created to keep the façade intact and broke through. I trusted him and allowed him into my whole world, slowly at first, waiting for the judgment or comment that would put the wall back up, but it never came. He did not understand the French part of me, but honored

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my family and my heritage and accepted the fact that life with me might be complicated.

My family was not sure what to do with this very American boy who wore a baseball cap and spoke no French, but slowly he was welcomed into our inner circle, one experience at a time. My family learned about the games of basketball and baseball, and he learned how to eat a five-course meal and drink cognac properly.

We were married on November 2, 1974, at Our Lady of Mercy Church in the Bronx. The party had a rolling bar on the Irish side of the room and bottles of red wine and cognac on the French side, and so began our balancing act of respecting each other's cultures.

Over the years, I have grown to see being different not as something to submerge and hide, but as something to be brought out into the light and shared. I am a French-American woman who can embrace all of the facets of who I am.

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