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Personal History
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The Madness of Spies

A Secret Service secret.

By John le Carré

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I carried my first 9-mm. automatic Browning when I was just twenty years old. I was a National Service second lieutenant in the Intelligence Corps in Austria. It was my first clandestine mission, and I was in heaven. The year, I think, was 1952, and I was stationed in Graz, the hub of the British Occupied Zone in the early Cold War years. The gun was loaded. On the advice of the Air Intelligence Officer, or A.I.O., in charge of the operation, I wore it jammed into my waistband against my left hip with the butt foremost, allowing for an easy draw across the body. Over it I wore a green loden coat, borrowed under a pretext from one of our Field Security drivers, and, for additional cover, a fetching green Tyrolean hat, bought at personal expense. Such was my disguise of choice for a top-secret night trip through sparsely populated countryside to Austria's border with Communist Czechoslovakia.

The author in Hamburg, in the early nineteen-sixties. Photograph by Ralph Crane / Time Life Pictures / Getty Images

The A.I.O., however, had opted for the more traditional spy's attire: fawn raincoat and trilby hat, which, together with his military mustache, gave him, to my callow eye, a rather too British look. But he knew best. The A.I.O. was a veteran of the business, as we National Service fledglings had often been reminded sotto voce by our seasoned superiors in the bar of the Wiesler hotel, reserved for British officers, where the A.I.O. could be observed of an early evening, always seated in the same corner and half-hidden by his Austrian newspaper, with a mahogany whiskey at his side and a crisp white handkerchief jammed into the cuff of his officer-class sports jacket. The A.I.O., they said, had done his share of this and that —as ever with the clear implication that we hadn't.

As became a man of mystery, the A.I.O. was a solitary. His office, which we never entered, was situated in the attic of the elegant villa on the edge of town that our military masters in Vienna had requisitioned for us Intelligence types. Spy ethic dictates that the higher up the building you go the more secret it gets, which explains why we mere Field Security trash were confined to the ground floor. But I knew his window. It was a dormer, thick with grimy net curtains. He had no known rank, and no known staff. He made no use of our mailroom. We assumed, but were never told, that he relied on his own communications system. Just occasionally, a standard tin box of papers would arrive for him by way of the Army Field Post Office, and although it looked exactly like the sort of junk we ourselves were handling, he would immediately hasten downstairs and, with an air of immense gravity, return with it to his aerie. He was said to be much decorated, but we never saw him in uniform. In short, he was the real McCoy. His work might look as boring as ours, but in reality he was an undercover Friend, meaning a member of M.I.6, the highest form of Intelligence life known to man.

Why me, sir? I asked him, when he suggested we take a quiet stroll along the river.

"Because you've got what it takes," he replied, in the bitten-off style of a man who would prefer not to be speaking at all.

How do you know I have, sir? I asked.

"Been watching you."

Our car was an innocent black Volkswagen Beetle with civilian plates. The A.I.O. explained that he had got it from Intelligence Organization Vienna, which, as far as I was concerned, was the summit of Olympus. Should we by chance be stopped by the Austrian police, he said, we were two businessmen from Graz interested in buying farmland for cash. This would explain the ten thousand U.S. dollars in the brown briefcase lying on the back seat of the Beetle. The dollars also came from Int. Org. Only when all else failed, he said, should we flash our cards and declare ourselves to be British military personnel engaged on secret duties.

At first as we drove I could think only of the Browning nudging at my hip. But as the night darkened and my body eased and the Browning grew warmer, we became a pair, which was what the A.I.O. had said we would do. "Think of it as part of you," he advised. So I did, even if from time to time I discreetly fingered the safety catch to make sure it was still on.

In what sort of situation might I be using it, sir? I asked.

"Contingency. If the Czech goons come after him, we give him covering fire. Not till I tell you, mind." And, as an afterthought, "Don't go for the legs. Aim for the mark."

The mark?

"Shoulders to groin and all points between."

My thoughts turned to the brave man we had come to meet: a high-ranking officer in the Czech Air Force, risking death and worse to bring precious information to the West. At this very moment, said the A.I.O., our man was creeping over the border with the aid of sympathetic frontier guards.

How about dogs? I asked.

"Drugged."

Once across, said the A.I.O., who was a stickler for need-to-know, our man would proceed to a certain frontier village just inside Austria, and this was the village we were heading for. Its name remained secret right up to the moment when the signpost blew it.

Is he defecting, sir?

The A.I.O. looked grim and shook his head. "Man's got a wife and kids, for God's sake. It's a one-time sell."

And then he'll go back?

"If he can."

And if he can't?

The A.I.O.'s silence was more eloquent than words.

A tiny inn stood at the empty roadside. Light burned yellow in the windows. The only sound was of male voices, which stopped dead as soon as we walked in. The A.I.O. went ahead in case there was trouble. I followed with the briefcase. In a single low-ceilinged room, a score of peasants in blue overalls stared at us in mute amazement through the tobacco smoke. A billiards table occupied the center of the room. Nobody was playing. A vacant bench stood next to the bar. The A.I.O. sat on it. With the briefcase at my feet, I sat beside him, observed by the peasants. The A.I.O. ordered two beers in snappish, swallowed-up German. Today I wonder whether "two beers" was the only German he knew. The landlord set them in front of us, and the echo as they hit the table seemed to go on forever.

"Fancy a game of billiards?" the A.I.O. muttered, in English, out of the corner of his mouth.

Love one, I muttered back.

The gun was indeed part of me: so much so that I had ceased to notice its presence on my hip. Stooping to address the ball, I was startled by the clang of a

heavy metal object striking the tiled floor, and looked around to identify the source. Finally, I saw the Browning lying at my feet, but by then the inn had emptied itself of customers and landlord. I retrieved it, returned it to my waistband, and picked up the briefcase.

"Abort," the A.I.O. ordered, pausing only to finish his beer.

His composure astonished me. Not a word of rebuke. We returned to the Volkswagen, sat in it, and waited. For whom? The Austrian police? Or our intrepid spy? The A.I.O. seemed at ease with either possibility, but neither appeared. He had a flask of Scotch and we took pulls from it. The dawn came, and somehow the purpose of our great mission evaporated. With a philosophical sigh, the A.I.O. started the engine and set course for Graz.

As with all great intelligence operations, ours had no known outcome—or none to me. Did the brave Czech airman ever make his attempt? I had no chance to ask. A couple of days later, the A.I.O. had vanished, leaving no forwarding address. Did he give back the ten thousand dollars, or keep the money for another day? In "A Perfect Spy," I made some use of the story, but my larger purposes did not allow me to give it the status it deserved as an account of my hero's first armed exploit On Her Majesty's Secret Service.

Nevertheless, with the ripening of years, I think I have hit upon an answer to the questions that have troubled me for so long. There was no Czech officer crossing the border that night. The briefcase did not contain ten thousand dollars; at best, there was an old pair of pajamas and a reserve bottle of Scotch. The A.I.O. was not the favored son of Int. Org., he was not an undercover officer of M.I.6, his work was just as tedious and useless as ours. He was one of those forgotten souls whom military bureaucracies dump on distant shores and forget about for years on end.

He was, in addition—if discreetly—mad, and living in a secret bubble all his own, a condition that in the spook world, rather like a superbug in a hospital, is endemic, hard to detect, and harder still to eradicate.

I can also hazard a guess about the nature of his madness, since from time to time I have experienced similar symptoms. The A.I.O., like the rest of us, dreamed the Great Spy's Dream. He imagined himself at the Spies' Big Table, playing the world's game. Gradually, the gap between the dream and the reality became too much for him to bear, and one day he decided to fill it. He needed a believer, so I got the job. I was well cast. Years later, for a short time, I did actually become an insider in the world that the A.I.O. pretended to inhabit, but it wasn't long before I, too, was fantasizing about a real British secret service, somewhere else, that did everything right that we either did wrong or didn't do at all.

My solution was to invent a spook world better suited to my needs, just as the A.I.O. had done. It was only our methods that were a little different.

My agreeable middle-aged roommate in the British Security Service, better known as M.I.5, was, I think, afflicted by a similar strain of the disease, although the symptoms in his case were different. But that is the nature of the disease.

I am speaking of the period of the Great Paranoia Epidemic that ran from the nineteen-fifties into the seventies, when practically everyone in M.I.5 above a certain rank, up to Sir Roger Hollis, the Director General, was suspected of being a

Russian spy. The virus infected swaths of Whitehall and Westminster, but it was the spies who were worst hit, and they did it to themselves, on the strident insistence of America's intelligence community.

The bacillus had begun its life in America, before sweeping eastward. First had come the Joe McCarthy era. McCarthy died in 1957, but his torch was quickly retrieved by a deranged C.I.A. inpatient of vast persuasive powers named James Jesus Angleton, who preached that the whole of the Western spook world was being controlled by superheads in the Kremlin. In human terms, Angleton's apocalyptic vision was forgivable. He had received his education in the black arts of double cross at the knee of one Kim Philby, a long-standing double agent in the service of the Kremlin and, as head of the M.I.6 station in Washington, Angleton's bosom buddy. If any spy ever needed an excuse for going off his head, it was James Jesus Angleton: fabled poker player, master of the spook universe, who woke up one morning to be told that his revered mentor, confessor, and fellow-boozer, Kim Philby, was a Russian spy.

But that doesn't excuse the C.I.A., which made a folk hero of its mad doctor, and looked on while he poisoned the family. Not only did Angleton single-handedly immobilize his own agency. He then, with his masters' blessing, performed the same service for its closest allies, to the ribald laughter of the K.G.B. Was Angleton ever invited to address the only logical conclusion to his thesis—namely, to close down the entire Western intelligence apparatus before the Russians led us over the cliff? I doubt it.

And M.I.5, assailed by the Angleton theory, rose superbly to the challenge. It was not content with spying on its own members; a cabal of middle and senior officers also found time to spy on Harold Wilson, the British Prime Minister, an episode in M.I.5 history that was documented in a dubious memoir put out by one of the conspirators. The author, you may remember, was Peter Wright, another poker pal of Angleton's. Strenuous efforts by the British government to suppress the book assured it a wide readership.

The atmosphere in those days in the corridors of Leconfield House, on Curzon Street, was therefore very much as I portrayed it in "Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy," and it was the atmosphere that prevailed in the corridor that led to the little room that my colleague—I'll call him Arthur—and I shared. In my memory, it is hushed, with furtive footsteps going past. It was my first in-house appointment.

Arthur was an M.I.5 paper-pusher of the old school: a meticulous, unadventurous, nine-to-six loyalist, with no ambitions to become what he was not. He had something of the donnish librarian about him, with bubbly gray hair overflowing at the sides, rimless spectacles, and an air of huge diligence and bustle. Sometimes he would humph, sometimes tut-tut, but he was always busy and never took a lunch hour: which was one good reason that the overworked internal-security staff decided that he was a Russian spy.

The lunch hour, they concluded, was when Arthur photographed his secret files for his Russian paymaster. The only problem was, what had he done with them? Fifty and more secret and top-secret files containing thousands of pages had been marked out to him by Registry over the past two months. None, it transpired, had been returned.

Had Arthur borrowed the files, hoping to get them back into the system before anyone spotted that they were missing? The sheer hard work of clandestine document photography is daunting, even these days. How many frames can you shoot off in a single lunch hour, even with a motor drive? A file could run to a dozen volumes or more. Each could contain a couple of hundred pages. Or was he taking them out of the building? On Fridays and Mondays, a good few of M.I.5's staffers brought suitcases into work for their weekends out of London. Was Arthur smuggling out files in his weekend suitcase? And was his overburdened K.G.B. paymaster, laboring in some squalid East End flat with the blinds down, perhaps behindhand with his photographing?

As the number of missing files grew, Arthur was hauled up to the fifth floor and invited to explain himself. His answers never varied: yes, he had worked on the missing files. Having worked on them, he had returned them to Registry. If they were missing, it was either Registry's fault or the fault of the janitors who pushed the trolleys. It was not Arthur's.

Soon his denials were rebounding on me. If Arthur wasn't a spy, then I must be. I had pinched the files from his "in" tray. Head of Personnel sent for me. How was I enjoying my first months in harness? Did I have money troubles? Was my marriage all right? How much was I drinking? He was willing to be a father to me. Like Arthur, I denied failing to return any files.

Desk officers in M.I.5 had individual steel cupboards in their rooms. If you left your room during working hours, you locked your papers in your steel cupboard and kept the key. One midmorning, two men in artisans' brown coats, the essential uniform of our internal-security team, strode into our room and demanded that Arthur hand over the key to his steel cupboard. Without lifting his head, he put a hand in the pocket of his librarian's shiny gray jacket, passed them the key, and resumed his work. Shelf after shelf of his steel cupboard was stuffed with missing files. But Arthur paid no attention, either to the files or to the men in brown coats who stood staring at them with their mouths open. He remained bowed over the file on his desk, studiously turning the pages.

Arthur and I were "vetters," Arthur the old hand, myself the trainee. Our job was to comb through the records of people who were in line to acquire access to secret information and make a first call about whether they should be allowed to have it, be investigated, or be shifted to less sensitive employment. Like the A.I.O., Arthur was a loner, with no home life that I knew of. Little by little, all the same, I persuaded him to share the odd Friday-evening pint with me in a nearby pub in Shepherd Market. And it was on one such evening that Arthur told me a disturbing story. A month before I joined his section, he had been dispatched to New York on a liaison visit to the F.B.I. And in New York, according to Arthur, the F.B.I. had shaken him out. Not once but every day, systematically. He likened the ordeal to

sustained psychological torture, and he wasn't sure that he had survived it unscathed.

Each evening when he returned to his Manhattan hotel after a day's liaison, he discovered that he had been moved to a different floor. Nobody in the hotel acknowledged this, he said. When he asked at the desk—politely—for his room key, the concierge would laugh and shake his head and tell him he'd got the number wrong, but here was the right key anyway, sir. So, instead of being on the fifth floor, where he'd slept the previous night, he found himself on the eighth, or the eighteenth, or the twenty-eighth, always the same size room, he said, and always the same space, the same curtains, cupboards, and bedspreads. But always a different floor. Night after night after night.

And there were no outward signs, Arthur insisted, peering into his tankard. The floor had changed, but the room hadn't. Each time around, his suits, shirts, socks, and underpants were laid out precisely as he had laid them out in the previous room. In the bathroom, it was the same story: razor, shaving brush, toothpaste, you name it. He was a methodical man, he said. Known for it. The smallest deviation would have caught his eye, and there wasn't one. Only the F.B.I. could have pulled off a job like that.

I asked Arthur whether he had fathomed the F.B.I.'s motive for taking all this trouble, and he said that he had given the question a great deal of consideration. His conclusion was that the Bureau was putting him under strain, then waiting to see how he responded and whom he got in touch with.

"They were trying to flush me out," he explained to his tankard.

Why would they want to do that? I asked.

Because of the vetting cases he'd handled, he said: file-holders who'd been small-time Communist sympathizers in their student days, but Arthur had given them the benefit of the doubt. He wondered in retrospect whether he might have crossed the line. Gone with them, even.

What line? I asked. Gone with them where?

"Clearing chaps I shouldn't have cleared," he said. "If I was soft on ex-Coms, perhaps I was a Com myself, and not necessarily ex." Then he added, "And, for all I know, they're right."

Are you telling me you could be a Communist sympathizer without even knowing it?

"Other chaps are," said Arthur. "If other chaps are, why shouldn't I be?"

In the nineteen-fifties, it took a lot to advise a friend to put his problems to a shrink, all the more so if he was twice your age and you were a probationer sharing an office with him five days a week. And there was a standing order that, if a staff member felt the need to unburden himself to a shrink, he had first to get the name of a shrink the Service approved of: which in effect meant telling M.I.5's Head of Personnel that you had a mental problem. I hoped Arthur's delusions would pass, but they didn't. Where the A.I.O., in the monotony of his neglected existence, had recast himself as a knight of derring-do, Arthur had recast himself as a victim of his own witch hunt. In a world that was almost as paranoid as ours is now, the security-risk assessor had become a security risk to himself. And, having decided this, he

took the only logical step available to him: he ceased to put his name to anything anymore. He locked everything away where even the F.B.I. couldn't see it. Then he was safe.

The superbug of espionage madness is not confined to individual cases. It flourishes in its collective form. It is a homegrown product of the industry as a whole. Is a cure at hand? I doubt it. The most down-to-earth citizens from the real world, appointed to oversee the spooks' activities, turn to clay in their hands. Faith in spies is mystical, fuelled by fantasy and halfway to religion. They're a protected species in our national psychology. Our banks and financial services may collapse, our economy may be going through the floor, our road and rail system may be a catastrophe, our Millennium Dome a laughingstock, the cost of fuel, energy, and water rising by the week, but our spies are immune to all of it. Never mind how many times they trip over their cloaks and leave their daggers on the train to Tonbridge, the spies can do no wrong.

It's the men who are mostly to blame. Were wise women present when the notorious and acutely embarrassing Iraq Dossier, justifying Britain's involvement in the Iraq war—and better known as the Dodgy Dossier—was composed? If they were, they were outgunned by the men of madness, who didn't merely plagiarize a five-month-old article dredged from an obscure academic journal; they seriously believed, in their hubris and ignorance of the real world, that they could get away with it. It is slender comfort, but entirely in keeping with the code of reward and punishment dear to our present government, that the dossier's principal architect should have been promoted to Chief of our Secret Service.

All of which is a tough thing to convey in fiction, or it was for me. I tried it long ago in "The Looking Glass War," and my readers hated me for it. I tried it again in "The Tailor of Panama," this time as comedy, and I was more or less forgiven. The trouble is that the reader, like the general public to which he belongs, and in spite of all the evidence telling him that he shouldn't, wants to believe in his spies: which, come to think of it, is how we went to war in Iraq. ♦

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