CHAPTER VII
OUR MAN IN HAVANA

[In Havana] 'where every vice was permissible and every trade possible, lay the true background for my comedy.'

— Graham Greene, Ways of Escape, 1980

In the summer of 1938 J. Maclaren-Ross lunched at Greene's Queen Anne house on the north side of Clapham Common. He was twenty-six and had come to ask Greene's permission to adapt A Gun For Sale for the radio. As they walked across the common to the pub, probably the one Greene used in The End of the Affair, Maclaren-Ross told him that he also sold vacuum cleaners. 'Greene... halted abruptly and turned to take a good look at me', Maclaren-Ross remembers. "Vacuum cleaners?" Greene asked, waiting attentively for details about the pay and the job. "I thought of signing on myself at one time to write a book about it afterwards of course. I never knew one could actually sell the things."1

About ten years later Alberto Cavalcanti asked Greene for a screenplay and the idea of writing a Secret Service Comedy took hold. It eventually became Our Man in Havana (1958) but Greene first set his story in 1938 in Tallinn, Estonia. His original protagonist had nothing to do with vacuum cleaners and it was the extravagance of a wife, not a daughter, that made his agent cheat the Service. There was a situation allowably comic, all the more if the wife was changed into a daughter.

The Cavalcanti film was never made but Greene remembered his idea for it, and Maclaren-Ross's vacuum cleaners, years later in Cuba, which he first visited in 1954 between his third and fourth trips to Vietnam. The circumstances of that visit were humorous enough to have been included in any Cold War comedy.

*Our Man in Havana* has a fine reputation. Except for Harvey Curtis Webster, who, dismissing the three entertainments of the 1950s in a paragraph, called it "barely consequential," everyone who has written about it has praised it. Most of the admiration, furthermore, is intelligent. DeVitis calls it "a delightful satire with a serious edge, one of the funniest books to appear in many a day." Kunkel pays tribute to its range and flexibility when he speaks of its witchlike brew of "mirth and murder, pomposity and poison, satire and suspense." Atkins praises it as "one of the most professional pieces of writing Greene has given us; it moves with... speed and precision... and it manages to pass comments on life which are central to Greene's thinking." The salute ends with Atkins's calling the book "the best of the entertainments."

These tributes are hard to gainsay. *Our Man in Havana* is freshly conceived and brilliantly executed. A warm, colourful work, it has all the absurd delicious trimmings of our technocratic age. It also maintains the difficult balance between politics and religious views.

Our Man in Havana produces a synthesis of the melodrama of the earlier entertainments and the comedy of the later ones. Norman Shrapnel calls it "a melodrama with undertones or a force with overtones." It has the light-heartedness of Loser Takes All in its sardonic treatment of what goes on in a supposedly heroic profession—the secret service.

In July 1941, Graham Greene joined the Secret Intelligence Service. An interesting sidelight of Greene's tenure in the SIS is the story of Garcia: a double agent in Lisbon, who fed the Nazis disinformation, pretending to control a ring of agents all over England, while all that he was doing was inventing armed forces movements and operations from maps, guides and standard military references. Garcia was the inspiration for Wormold, a character in Our Man in Havana.

The novel has a political setting in Cuba before the Castro revolution. Despite Greene's radical leanings, it disappointed his anti-Batista friends because, in his own words, 'the object was not to talk about Cuba but to make fun of the Secret Service.' Jim Wormold, a vacuum cleaner distributor in Havana, is recruited into the British Secret Intelligence Service. He goes along with this because he needs money to keep his extravagant and motherless young daughter in a luxury he can ill afford.

After coming on board, Wormold shows a remarkable capacity for 'discovering' fresh agents in the field. In fact they are no more than

figments of his imagination. He gets very creative: the more agents, the more money. To pull off his deceit, Wormold invents incidents and conscientiously reports them to London. The senior officers in London are genuinely pleased with the drawings he sends them of a new weapon, unaware that the sketches are only greatly enlarged versions of his vacuum cleaner design diagrams. They pore over their treasure:

'Fiendish, isn't it?' the chief said. 'The ingenuity, the simplicity, the devilish imagination of the thing.' He removed his black monocle... 'See this one here six times the height of a man... what does this remind you of?'

Hawthorne said unhappily, 'A two-way nozzle.'

'What's a two-way nozzle?'

'You sometimes find them with a vacuum cleaner.'

'Vacuum cleaner again. Hawthorne, I believe we may be on to something so big that the H-bomb will become a conventional weapon...'

'What have you in mind, sir?'

'I'm no scientist,' the Chief said, 'but look at this great tank. It must stand nearly as high as the forest-trees. A huge gaping mouth at the top, and this pipe-line—the man's only indicated it. For all we know, it may extend for miles—from the mountains to the sea perhaps. You know the Russians are said to be working on some idea—something to do with the power of the sun, sea-evaporation. I don't know what it's all about, but I do know this thing is Big. Tell our man we must have photographs. 8

It is almost unbelievable that high-ranking officers in British Intelligence wouldn't spot the deception, or at least suspect that Wormold is taking them in, since the drawings do look like a vacuum cleaner, and after all, he is a vacuum cleaner distributor. Of course it is understood that Greene is satirising the intelligence world he'd entered during the Second World War, when no doubt he met up with some oddballs, and some dullards too. On the whole, British Intelligence justifiably had an almost unimpeachable reputation. But the lighter parts of the novel are simply good fun, poked at the expense of MI6.

To lend credibility to his confections, Wormold uses the names of real people with real jobs in Havana who have no idea that their identities have been handed on to British Intelligence as their sympathisers. These included Raul the pilot, too partial to alcohol, a dancer called Teresa, and other names gleaned from a country club membership list which included such men as Engineer Cifuentes and Professor Luis Sanchez. None could know that their lives are at risk. The situation is ripe for humour—Greene returned in the case of this novel to the term 'an entertainment.' But the plot soon begins to run into tragedy. Let us drop into the story at the point when Wormold and his secretary, Beatrice, who has come out from headquarters, go for a walk after dinner. Wormold, anxious to get out of the spy business, weaves a story in which Raul fails, and dies in the attempt. But Raul is a real person, a real pilot. Beatrice is not yet fully aware of, but is vaguely suspicious about, what her boss is up to. At first she thinks that Wormold is worried about Raul, assigned to take aerial photographs of the made-up machines. According to the mythical 'agent
Cifuentes' these weapons are being transported from army headquarters at Bayamo to the edge of the forest, where the terrain turns so rugged that mules must take them over.

Wormold reports to London in the style of an adventure story, creating the action as it comes into his mind. Since the equipment doesn't exist, it can't be photographed for London. The pilot must fail in his mission to get pictures, and Wormold decides on a crash. The way in which he concocts Raul's pretended demise is no doubt very like the way Greene worked on a plot line. Greene has never been funnier, but later the story becomes disturbing, as fact follows fiction.

In a few pages of the novel, we come to know Havana—the beauty of the women, the nightclubs, the wild weather streaming in from the Atlantic—our increasing knowledge running in tandem with the increasing danger being unearthed. Wormold's mental quickness is such that he can conjure up characters like a magician pulling a rabbit out of a hat—as could Greene. In this way, Wormold is closer to Greene than any other created character in the author's repertoire. Wormold cooks up his imaginary agents, as does the novelist.

Here, we are coming close to the creative mind in operation. This is what a great writer does—he tries to make his fictional characters live and breathe. The various possible permutations fashioned by Wormold, alias Greene, include Raul's being foiled, or perhaps he disappears into Captain Segura's tortuous clutches:

Wormold [mulling it over in his mind, with Beatrice in a
would warn London that he was going off the air in case Raul was forced to talk. The radio-set would be dismantled and hidden after the last message had been sent... Or perhaps Raul would take off in safety and they would never know what exactly happened to him over the Oriente mountains. Only one thing in the story was certain: he would not arrive in Jamaica and there would be no photographs.

'What are you thinking?' Beatrice [asked]...
'I was thinking of Raul...'
'Anxious?'
'Of course I'm anxious.'

Wormold is working out his story for the SIS in London, and he speaks aloud to Beatrice.

'If Raul had taken off at mid-night, he would refuel just before dawn in Santiago, where the ground-staff were friendly, everyone in the Oriente province being rebels at heart. Then when it was just light enough for photography and too early for the patrol planes to be up, he would begin his reconnaissance over the mountains and the forest.'

'He hasn't been drinking?'
'He promised me he wouldn't. One can't tell.

Both Beatrice and Wormold speak almost simultaneously of 'Poor Raul.' They leave the restaurant heading down the Avenida de Maceo. Wormold feels himself to be 'part of the slow erosion of Havana.' He tells Beatrice, 'One of those lights up there may be him. How solitary he must feel.' She replies, 'You talk like a novelist.' The conversation shifts and then returns:
'He should be over Matanzas by now. Unless he's been delayed.'

'Have you sent him that way?'

'Oh, of course he decides his own route.'

'And his own end?'

Something in her voice—a kind of enmity—startled him again. Was it possible she had begun to suspect him already?

She wants more details:

His lips were dry with salt and apprehension. It seemed to him that she must have guessed everything. Would she report him to Hawthorne?... 'What are you hinting at?'

'You mean there isn't to be a crash at the airport—or on the way?'

'How do you expect me to know?'

'You've been behaving all the evening as if you did. You haven't spoken about him as though he were a living man. You've been writing his elegy like a bad novelist preparing an effect.'

She asks Wormold to promise her that nothing has been fixed. He doesn't answer because it is absurd. The answer comes in the form of Dr. Hasselbacher, coming down the pavement, head bent, nervous and disturbed. He invites them to his home. A call comes; someone has died and he is even more upset. They talk. Hasselbacher disappears out of the room.

'There has been an accident,' Dr. Hasselbacher said. 'Just an accident... A car has crashed on the road near the airport. A young man...
He was too fond of the glass.'

Beatrice said, 'Was his name by any chance Raul?'

'Yes,' Dr. Hasselbacher said. 'That was his name.'

(Our Man in Havana, 116-24.)

Rounding out the roster of major characters are Captain Segura, Havana's chief of police, and Dr. Hasselbacher, a retired German M.D. who meets Wormold every morning for a daiquiri. Hasselbacher left Hitler's Germany for the tropics in the early 1930s in order to escape mechanized violence. Representing pre-1914 Europe, he cannot summon his wealth, wisdom, or historical sense to ward off pain. Although he prefers to be vague on the subject, he carries around with him an old hurt that has never healed. His favourite pastime, working crossword puzzles, shows his befuddlement with modern life. Good at his word games, he cannot shut out his painful past or make sense of the madness of the Cold War age. He takes up spying with a full understanding of its wastefulness, and his life, like Wormold's, soon becomes a vacuum into which interference rushes. His apartment is searched and gutted, his office and laboratory are smashed, and he is killed—all as a direct result of spying. His wise affability recalls the Gom in Loser Takes All. But spying is so cancerous in its evils that he cannot block the death drift engulfing him and several others in Havana.

Dr. Hasselbacher's foil is Captain Segura. Practical rather than theoretical, small and tough rather than large and affable, Segura drips evil. Hasselbacher cannot bear being in the same room with him. Called
"the Red Vulture," he is described as "a well-cared-for weapon" and as "a very small man in a very tight uniform." Said to torture his prisoners and to carry a cigarette case made of human skin, he represents a primordial evil. He rises from a chair "like a small tight green snake," and the tape recorder in his office gives off a snakelike hiss. Although his professional dedication recalls the lieutenant in *The Power and the Glory*, his police duties have not killed his sexual drive. The threat he poses to Wormold is dual: as a policeman and as an eager suitor to Milly. Both these threats dissolve, though, and Wormold's parting judgement of him is oddly charitable: "he wasn't a bad chap." But his smallness and the danger he exudes during Wormold's last months in Cuba mirror a general disconnectedness: the incipient revolution in Cuba has created a moral vacuum where everything is for sale and where nobody is safe from violence.

The tangle of cross-purposes, subdivisions, puzzles, and games make reality elusive. Philip Stratford calls *Our Man in Havana* "a fiction about fiction-making," ⁹ in one of his many fine insights into Greene. Like Joyce's *A Portrait*, the book asks about the artist's pride, guilt, and dehumanization and also about the destructiveness of the creative instinct. The artist's imaginative reshaping of reality and his sacrifice also get into two other works of Greene's late maturity, *A Burnt-Out Case* (1961) and *Carving a Statue* (1964). Like *Our Man in Havana*, these works turn on the obsessiveness of artistic creation. The novel counterpoints sexual

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drive and artistic activity, while the play shows a sculptor-father pridefully imitating God and Father and, in the process, killing life.

Onwards, after the death of the agent-Raul, Beatrice tells Wormold they have to save the other supposed agents because there was an assassination attempt on Doctor Cifuentes, a spy. Meanwhile, London finds out that the other side wants to kill Wormold during a trade association meeting. They are going to poison him. Wormold succeeds in unmasking Carter, the enemy spy, and spills the whisky that had been poisoned.

Wormold has to get the list of names of the other enemy spies. Captain Segura, who wants to marry Milly, is in possession of it. Wormold gets Segura drunk in a game of checkers where bottles of Scotch and whisky are the game pieces. The captain falls asleep and Wormold takes his gun and a microphoto of the list. He wants to take revenge on Carter and murders him at night with Segura's weapon. Wormold sends the photo to London but it is overexposed.

Furthermore, Wormold, like his predecessors in the entertainments, is forced to a reckoning:

He stood on the frontier of violence, a strange land he had never visited before; he had his passport in his hand. 'Profession: Spy.' 'Characteristic Features: Friendlessness.' 'Purpose of Visit: Murder.' No visa was required. His papers were in order.

(Our Man in Havana, 203.)
The act of vengeance for Wormold, as for Raven and D., is an assertion of his individuality: 'If I love or if I hate, let me love or hate as an individual. I will not be 59200/5 in anyone's global war.' It is not Wormold's sense of duty to his job but his humanity which makes him seek revenge. His feelings are similar to D.'s after Else's death:

"Vengeance was unnecessary when you believed in a heaven. But he had no such belief. Mercy and forgiveness were scarcely virtues in a Christian—they came too easily." (Our Man in Havana, 206-07.)

The reward for what Wormold has done is tinged with irony. Deported from Cuba and back in London, he wonders what they will do to him. The Secret Service recognises its mistake, but does not dare to admit it. Wormold is awarded a medal and appointed instructor in the espionage school. He marries Beatrice, his secretary, and lives, one presumes, happily ever after. But despite the farcical plot and the happy ending, Our Man in Havana is not a mere spoof. The aftermath, in fact, is similar to that of Greene's earlier entertainments, sad and ironic. It is certainly more funny and amusing but it fails to reach the same heights as a suspense thriller. The chill of terror round the corner and the breathless pace are not the same as in Greene's earlier entertainments. It is, may be, the ethos of the period (to which Greene has always been sensitive) which has something to do with the gain and loss. Alfred Kazin remarks perceptively: With Our Man in Havana... we can see that the Khruschev Dulles age lends itself not to dread but to farce. Our plight is now so universal and at the same time so unreal that the age of anxiety has turned into the age of absurdity.¹⁰

Besides, Greene says his novel is only a light-hearted comedy, but it has a dark and philosophical background which lends it substance and contains many of his recurring themes. There is Milly's Catholicism, for example, which Wormold doesn't share but encourages. He tries to protect Milly against sexual corruption by sending her to a Catholic school and getting her a membership at the Country Club. However, it is difficult to distinguish between Milly's Catholicism and her rampant consumerism. When she prays to God, she prays for a pony—specifically, that He will somehow influence her father to come up with the money for the pony she desires. When Wormold tells her that he has decided to purchase the horse, she contentedly responds: 'It's wonderful, isn't it, how you always get what you pray for?' (Our Man in Havana, 32.) The Catholic God had appeared in many guises in many of Greene's novels: as the task-master against whom Pinkie rebels in Brighton Rock; as the 'hound of heaven' chasing the Whisky Priest through purgatory in The Power and the Glory; as tempter and lover in The End of the Affair; never before, however, had God figured as the dispenser of consumer durables. After she receives the horse, Milly relates a dream in which she comes face-to-face with an entity she believes was God: 'It said—only it sounded much more apocalyptic in the middle of the night—"You've bitten off more than you can chew, my girl. What about the Country Club?"' (Our Man in Havana, 44-45.)

Wormold takes Milly's consumer-oriented faith quite seriously although he does not necessarily believe in it, as evidenced by his willingness to take on the work Hawthorne offers him despite his
reservations. The specifics of Milly's faith are largely beside the point—as Cain observed, 'the Catholic Church has no monopoly on extravagant girls.' So far as the matter is concerned with Our Man in Havana, it is accepted that the Catholic element should have been central, and so because the narrative did little to suggest the significance of the Catholic theme in the work as a whole—as Hawthorne did before her, Milly practically disappears from the narrative after God (i.e., MI6's Chief) grants her a membership at the Country Club—it left the novel open to charges that its Catholicism was a sham, or that Greene had simply used it as a prop, not qualitatively different than the edition of Lamb's Tales from Shakespeare that Wormold uses to encode his messages.

It has been said of Graham Greene that he reduces theology to melodrama and raises melodrama to theology. Wormold's lack of compunction about swindling the Secret Service—his derisive conviction that its activities are 'unreal'—reflects Greene's doctrine that human goals are irremediably sordid and pointless; that man is saved by grace alone. Milly is a symbol of grace, and Wormold, for all his 'invincible ignorance' of God, is touched by it.11

The political background to the novel is as vague as Segura's crimes. There are certainly disturbances in the hills around Santiago and everyone in Oriente province is said to be a rebel at heart. Batista's

'regime was creaking dangerously towards its end,' (Our Man in Havana, 22.) and if Segura is not the heavy he might have been, he does talk with uncanny knowledge about the politics of torture. Beyond that, things are not related specifically to Cuba. The political thrust of the novel is against government intervention, of any variety, and for the inviolable freedom of the individual. It is the imperial powers who are culpable here, and Greene notes the results of their empires in the crumbling architecture of his settings and in the relations between the races. Milly is neither wealthy nor part of the social elite of Havana but she is white and blonde and potentially a great catch for Segura, though from her point of view he is not right for a husband.

Indeed, Greene found a touch of ancient Athens in Havana. People met to discuss politics. Castro walked unexpectedly into hotels and cafés and started discussions. His availability and the continuing political debate in the press and the streets left the sense of revolution alive despite the tide of paper that resulted from an economy run on strict Marxist lines. The Catholic Churches were open: 'There is no inherent opposition between Marxist economics and Catholicism,' Greene announced. The Church's existence in Cuba was easier than in Poland because 'Cuba is less strictly Catholic than Poland, just as Marxism here is less philosophical.' Greene quoted Castro: "We know that a revolutionary can have a religious belief. The Revolution does not force men, it does not intrude into their personal beliefs. It does not exclude anyone." These were not empty words.' Priests had been released from prison, catechism
classes were taking place in Havana and in Santiago there had been a retreat for parents.  

Greene noted the way the American clergy nevertheless continued to lie about the Church in Cuba and he thought it fortunate that Castro had been 'educated as a Catholic and knows that the voice of the American hierarchy is not the voice of the Church.' Greene found Cuba 'a new voice in the Communist world.' It is 'a first breach in Marxist philosophy (not in Marxist economics)—that philosophy as dry as Bentham and as outdated as Ingersoll.' In Cuba the spirit of evolution, 'the sense of glory and the sense of the unexpected' was alive. People were free and the arts had never been so encouraged. Without that freedom Castro had said, "What does the Revolution become? A yoke. And that is not a Revolution. What does the Revolution become? A school of domesticated animals. And that is not Revolution."  

These heady days were not to last. In 1966 when Greene returned to report again for the Telegraph, he was more sombre. The American blockade and Hurricane Flora had exacted their toll. Rations were tight, queues long. There were also forced labour camps. Greene did not object to these in principle: a man unsuited to military service instead put in his three years on the land. But he took exception to the fact that leaves and family visits were not allowed, and rumour had it that the camps were used to house homosexuals, layabouts and priests. Castro had spoken against the camps. 'The Revolution,' he said, 'does not mean slave
labour," but Greene suspected that somewhere in high circles there had been a struggle 'between the intention and the practice.' This was not an error of policy, which Castro usually admitted publicly. This was more serious. 'A moral mistake is more dangerous than a tactical because it compromises the revolution. Only the revolution can kill the revolution.'

Cuba stimulated Greene's interest in the Caribbean and Latin America. It was an area where the need for change was evident and where Cuba provided an example of the rapid benefits of a revolutionary reconstruction of society. Politics there were a matter of life and death, and perhaps Greene appreciated, as he suggested the Cubans should, the value of having 'an enemy always in sight.' Anti-Americanism opened many doors in the Caribbean and Latin America. Greene formed deep friendships there that led to open political commitments.

After all, Our Man in Havana has something about a view of politics that is part of the novel's final achievement. Greene's life is filled with what he calls his 'commitments', to small, endangered countries and, above all, to individuals. He reserves a special affection and respect for people who struggle for human rights and freedom against horrific dictatorships such as those of Haiti and pre-Castro Cuba. The point needs to be made in order to grasp that Greene's revulsion from international power politics in Our Man in Havana is not the response of an ivory-

16. Ibid., 148.
towered intellectual, but that of a novelist who has frequently been as close to world affairs as a creative writer could hope to be. What such involvement leads to in this novel, however, is a politics of the personal life, an implied plea for corners of human experience to be kept free of the influence of kingdoms and thrones and powers.

*Our Man in Havana* could conceivably lay claim to the status of Greene's most 'popular' novel, not necessarily because of the number of copies it sold, or because the film adaptation, also directed by Carol Reed, performed reasonably well for Columbia Pictures, but because in playing the Cold War for laughs it made light of an issue that consumed a massive amount of intellectual energy and effort, but that only rarely intruded directly into the lives of private citizens until the Vietnam War. Taking into consideration the 'light' of *Our Man in Havana*, David Pryce-Jones reflects:

"No writer outside the Communist Party has led such a campaign against the West... Greene is sincere. His projection of the cold war years is pure melodrama, but he has come to believe it absolutely... Written with the added authority of someone once on the inside, *Our Man in Havana* and *The Human Factor* are novels celebrating the bankruptcy of British intelligence in its efforts at defence. Such efforts were a waste of energy, evidence only that the innocent were persecuted and the upper crust unscrupulous."

Throwing light on the theme of the novel, Urbashi Barat comments:

“Greene’s political theme—the importance of the human being against the impersonal might of the State is repeated in most of his subsequent novels, with the exception of A Burnt-Out Case. It is very much at the heart of the last of his entertainments, Our Man in Havana, which retains so many of his earlier subjects and themes, espionage, pursuit, Catholicism, innocence, American values, corruption and treachery.”

Furthermore, the revolutionary government of Cuba allowed Our Man in Havana to be filmed in the Cuban capital, but Castro complained that the novel did not accurately portray the brutality of the Batista regime. Greene commented:

“Alas, the book did me little good with the new rulers in Havana. In poking fun at the British Secret Service, I had minimized the terror of Batista’s rule. I had not wanted too black a background for a light-hearted comedy, but those who had suffered during the years of dictatorship could hardly be expected to appreciate that my real subject was the absurdity of the British agent and not the justice of a revolution”.