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LE CARRE'S TOUGHEST CASE

By Joseph Lelyveld

IT IS ALMOST TOO OBVIOUS TO POINT OUT, BUT THE man behind the novels of John le Carré has a lot in common with his characters. This is so not only because of his presumed emergence from the shadowy world of Her Majesty's secret service and his multiple personae. It is so also when you meet him, for David Cornwell — the creator of the le Carré mask and *oeuvre* — customarily discloses himself the way his books disclose their plots: disarmingly, in artfully controlled stages, never entirely.

Yet in his 11th novel — "A Perfect Spy," just out in Britain and to be published in the United States in May — Cornwell steps out from behind le Carré, setting down pointers to his own past as never before. Significantly, the new novel is the first of his thrillers not to have been submitted to his former employers in the British Government for clearance. Cornwell observes the proprieties: He is careful not to identify the departments that would normally have had to give their permission and careful, as well, not to declare the reason for his omission this time. But in the hours of conversation I had with him at his homes in London's Hampstead and on the rocky Cornish coast — the only interviews he would have, he said, on the new novel and its genesis — he deftly guided me to an informed guess. "A Perfect Spy" was not offered for clearance because it is, of all his books, the first to make direct use of his own experiences in what he calls "the secret world" and thus the one most likely to incur censorship from what remains the government, of all Western governments, most obsessed with its secrets.

David Cornwell would never put it this way — although John le Carré might, if he were projecting it as fiction — but it followed from my guess that one of Britain's best-established authors was daring the authorities to make themselves absurd by prosecuting him under the Official Secrets Act. For what exactly? Only the authorities and Cornwell could say for sure. But to the extent that his own early biography overlaps with that of Magnus Pym — the fictional double agent who comes close to being his alter ego in the new book — the author can be said to have lifted the curtain that still conceals the way the declining imperial power set about in the post-World War II years to recruit bright young Englishmen to spy on other bright young Englishmen.

"A Perfect Spy" shows Pym going through his rites of initiation into the secret world in Bern, Vienna and Oxford where, as an undergraduate, he infiltrates left-wing student groups and sends reports to an agency in London about which he has been told little, except that it is patriotic, official and British. Cornwell clammed up when, trying to get down to crude facts, I asked whether he had actually done in his Oxford days what he makes Pym do in his novel. A thoroughly engaging conversationalist with a rare gift for mimicry, for getting the accent and intonation of voices right, he now looked away into a middle distance, kneading his tufted, rust-colored eyebrows with his forefingers.

Getting nowhere, I asked why he was reluctant to answer my question. "I don't think it would have been a respectable thing to have done," he replied on a note of such exquisite, not to say hilarious, ambiguity that the truth of the matter, I thought, stood out clearly.

Still, anyone trying to read "A Perfect Spy" as a veiled memoir of the author's experience as an intelligence officer will soon feel frustrated. Cornwell's trail into the secret world becomes hard to trace once Magnus Pym leaves Oxford and it is not, finally, in the narrative of Pym's career as an agent that a light is cast into the darker recesses of David Cornwell's past and mind. It is not the character of Magnus Pym that makes this Cornwell's most personally revealing book. It is, instead, the sometimes devastating portrait of Rick Pym, Magnus's father, a man of immense social charm and no inner values. Rick is the successful public man David Cornwell fears he might have become had he not reincarnated himself as John le Carré and veered off into literature.

And even then, the point is not merely confessional. The sharpness of the David Cornwell self-portrait found in Magnus Pym enables the author to tackle a subject that has tantalized and eluded him since he first started to write 25 years ago: his extraordinary boyhood as the son of an overwhelming and consuming, charming but mendacious confidence man. Rick Pym is the fictional projection of Cornwell's own father.

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Ronald Cornwell, this obsessive high roller who simultaneously espoused and flouted the traditional middle-class virtues of hard work and probity, made his second son a minor character in the obscure drama of his life. (David's mother, the first of his father's three wives, vanished from the scene when he was only 3.) The process of discovering, as an adolescent, what his father was all about, he now says, provided him with his first experience of a secret world and the craft of espionage. In other words, what he knew about his father, he learned by spying. Now, finally, after a succession of failed attempts, he has managed to deal with that experience in a novel and recapture his father as a character. In drawing his portrait of Rick Pym, he makes his most bruising revelations.

"It was only when I took leave of Smiley in my own mind that I was able to address myself to my real father," David Cornwell said. He was referring, of course, to George Smiley, his best-known character who appeared on the first page of the first le Carré novel, "Call for the Dead," published under the le Carré *nom de plume* because David Cornwell was still working in the government for surrogate fathers like Smiley. Smiley's physical appearance was suggested, the author told me, by someone Cornwell knew in the Defense Ministry and his long-suffering manner was drawn from an old tutor at Lincoln College, Oxford. The character, who appeared in five later novels and then, with Alec Guinness in the role, in two celebrated television series, shared with his creator an interest in 17th-century German literature. They also came to share a vision of the secret world, of the meaning of loyalty and betrayal. But David Cornwell's direct references to his own life were strictly controlled, more elusive than allusive, in the Smiley books.

THE REAL FATHER, RONNIE, DIED 10 years ago. By then, father and son were mutually estranged and embittered. John le Carré's triumphs — more specifically, the millions his books had earned — were for Ronnie both a source of pride and grievance. The grievance was that here was capital in his own name, there for the taking, practically *owed* to him — or so he could easily convince himself — and yet out of reach. Knowing how his father had preyed on wives, parents, in-laws, close friends and innocent or not-so-innocent bystanders, knowing how he left one and nearly all with a shimmering vision of a huge payoff in an always pending real estate deal and a vaporous promise to "see you right," the son usually managed to withstand the paternal blandishments and appeals for money.

"I would pass him the odd couple of grand," the author said, thinking back to encounters in which the father-son relationship was painfully reversed, "but nothing of the dimensions which he felt he was owed. He had a marvelous brain for instant arithmetic. Once, in Vienna, he worked out with me what my education had cost. He overlooked the fact that some parts of it were never paid — and other parts were paid with dried fruit — and figured out what it would all have been worth to him if he had simply invested it. Then he suggested a sensible settlement figure."

David Cornwell's voice trailed off, and now Ronnie was speaking through his son's mouth. "Son," he was saying, "to sit here and feel that you are not able to put your hand in your pocket for your old man. It's not the money. It's the gesture . . . ."

With the catharsis of the novel behind him, he can laugh at his imitation. Indeed, recovering his sense of humor where his father was concerned was an essential step to writing the book. "It wasn't until three or four years ago," he said at our first meeting, "that it dawned on me that the only way I could tell this story and get the humor out of it that I wanted — and through the humor, the compassion — was to make the son, by extension, in many ways worse than the father. So there could be no question of self-pity."

The balance between compassion and indignation achieved in the novel is harder to maintain in conversation, and it was only at our subsequent meetings that Cornwell ventured beyond "A Perfect Spy" to deal directly with recollections of Ronnie. The father who introduced himself at a Berlin film studio as his son's agent, explaining that he was doing advance work for Paramount for the filming of "The Spy Who Came In From the Cold" and then leaving behind, as was his custom, a mound of unpaid bills. The father who twice threatened to sue the son (once over a half-realized but still recognizable portrait in "A Naïve and Sentimental Lover," the other time over a television interview in which he felt himself to have been slighted). The father who appears to have represented himself to a woman he fancied in Brussels as Ron le Carré, the famous author, and who may not have been above thoughts of blackmail on hearing a tale about his son and a woman in another European city. The father who had to be bailed out of jail in Zurich and Jakarta, whose unpaid bills were likely to be waiting for his son whenever he checked himself in at a luxury hotel. The smooth-talking father who could, over a few drinks, persuade a normally dutiful Swiss railroad engineer to deliver him in an unscheduled, private train to Wengen, where his son has a ski lodge. The father who, at a time when he was not just penniless but deeply in debt, could be embraced by the headwaiter upon entering the Savoy Grill.

Some of Ronnie's capers seem funny in retrospect, others not. But, for a moment at least, I thought I heard more nostalgia than resentment in Cornwell's voice when he said, "He pulled some wonderful cons in my name."

ALL HIS LIFE, RONALD CORNWELL MANAGED A BETter-than-plausible imitation of an entrepreneur with flair. His eldest son, Anthony, two years older than David and now the creative director of a New York advertising firm, passes on a story of how Ronnie managed to talk his way out of an enormous bill at

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the *grand luxe* Kulm Hotel in St. Moritz. He simply bought the hotel — that is, he persuaded the manager that his parties and profligate spending had all been part of a test of the hotel's services on behalf of a syndicate that was about to purchase the establishment. The manager was so relieved to hear that Ronnie had been satisfied that he forgot the tab. Sometimes Ronnie dreamed up big deals and nearly pulled them off, only to overplay his hand by turning down a fat profit in hopes of an even fatter one.

"He did everybody down," David Cornwell's first wife, Ann, says of her former father-in-law. "If he had a choice between being honest and dishonest, he'd be dishonest. It made him feel clever."

David Cornwell remembers that his father's laugh had a frightening ring to it when it went on too long, that his hugs suggested violence as well as love. He remembers, too, times when his father — who also accumulated heavy debts to bookies — seemed to be hiding out in physical fear.

The first glimmering that Ronnie might be something other than an ordinary businessman registered in David's preadolescent imagination during the war. In a period of austerity, his father would arrive at St. Andrew's in Pangbourne, the boarding school Tony and David attended, in flashy cars, accompanied by flashy women in feathered hats. The fathers of the other boys were in the army or navy. His was trafficking on the black market in medicines and fruit. "I realized," David Cornwell said, "that by the standards of the world into which he projected me, he was himself just not quite what he should be."

He was 18 before he discovered that his father was a convicted felon, jailed as an embezzler when David was a small boy. Ronnie was standing in Great Yarmouth as a Liberal candidate for Parliament when the secret came out. Cornwell is convinced that his father arranged to be confronted with his own hidden past at a public meeting, in order to drown out a Tory whispering campaign. The son was almost taken in by the well-prepared *mea culpa* his father delivered then, which now rolled off his own lips as he repeated it for my

"Many, many years ago," his Ronnie voice was saying, "when I was making my way in life, as you will be too, make no mistake about it, I was in the position of the office boy who borrowed a few stamps from the till . . . ."

What he calls "the sheer enchantment of Ronnie" still worked for him then, but he already knew how appearance and reality could diverge. The father's plush offices, luxurious suburban residence, big property deals and splashy parties could not conceal from his son the fact that every trip to the butcher or local garage in the gleaming Bentley was a high-risk adventure, for it could always end with the embarrassment of being told that there would be no more meat or gas on credit.

"Listen," the Ronnie voice was telling the creditors, "I had to make my way in the world once. I understand your problems, but you must understand mine. I've got a temporary problem of liquidity. There's money out there working for both of us and you'll be seen right. Come to dinner meanwhile."

In his own voice, David Cornwell continued: "So they'd come to dinner and eat a piece of meat on credit and drink themselves into the ground, because you can always get drink on credit provided you order in dozens. They would drink whatever they wanted for as long as they wanted and go away full — but unpaid."

Ronnie craved respectability, but less as an end in itself than as a means. The right contact, the right friends, the right name dropped in the right place, just the right present for the local bank manager's wife or child might be nurtured into credit. Some debts were occasionally paid off, but what came in mostly went toward incurring new obligations on new deals that would miraculously see everyone right. The weight of his indebtedness never made him desperate. It was, in fact, what he lived on. But the larger it got, the grander his style of living had to become to keep the bubble from bursting.

"There may have been the odd piece of land," said his son. "There may have been the odd successful deal. But I think that for as long as he could hold the system together, he was never at any one time solvent. I doubt whether there was a time in his life of more than a few months when he could have signed a check for 1,000 pounds with confidence."

He understood that if he stood for Parliament — the first time it was to get out of active duty in the army in wartime — he enhanced his plausibility. Sending his sons to the right schools achieved the same end — paying the tuition regularly did not — and so did the lavish parties. David Cornwell remembers the actor Trevor Howard at the house and, another time, tents on the lawn when the entire Australian national cricket team arrived. Hoping to capitalize on the visit, Ronnie had bought 100 or so cricket bats for the Australians to autograph; in a typically grand gesture, he meant to distribute them to the sons of existing or potential creditors. But setting up an assembly line for the signing proved impossible at the party.

Ronnie was only briefly fazed. "The team was staying at the Strand Palace Hotel," David recalled, "and he got about 10 of the prettiest girls he could find from his limitless supply of lovelies and sent them all around at 6 o'clock in the evening with the bats. He told the boys he'd sent them a nice present and they'd find it waiting at the bar. There were these terribly pretty girls with the cricket bats."

This was not the kind of anecdote his father would tell him directly, but one he would overhear when Ronnie was regaling his raffish circle of underlings and retainers. "It was," he said with hindsight, "like listening to somebody on the dirty tricks side of the intelligence service boasting how he'd done a burglary." When they were alone, father and son seldom talked. "Practically all our conversations," Cornwell said, "the ones that really counted, were conducted in front of other people. All through our lives."

The eerie sense of isolation and emotional neediness that came from such a father drove Ronnie's sons to seek what David now calls "neutral ground." They could feel at home neither in his circle nor the very proper schools they attended. Tony's eventual solution was to emigrate to America. David, at 16, fled to Switzerland, to Bern, to immerse himself further in the German language, which had seemed to offer him at school an "internal refuge."

Ronnie's bank drafts never came on schedule, often never came at all, so David survived, as Magnus Pym does in the novel, on odd jobs, including one washing elephants with a long brush. The plot of "A Perfect Spy" dictates that Pym go from Bern to Oxford, then wind up in the intelligence corps in Austria. In David Cornwell's young life, intelligence service in Austria preceded Oxford. By then, he had met Ann, who would become his wife.

Ann, now married to a British diplomat stationed in Zimbabwe, was one of the first people David had known who could not be charmed by his father. Ronnie and she recognized each other, from the start, as rivals for his affections. Then, just before the young couple was to wed, Ronnie went bust in spectacular fashion. David Cornwell recalls the headline in The Daily Express over the report of his bankruptcy: "Uncrowned King of Chalfont St. Peter Owes a Million and a Quarter," it said, referring to the suburb where Ronnie had established himself as a dazzling light of the country club set. For the scale of his crash to be appreciated, one may convert 1954 pounds into 1986 dollars. The debts he amassed would be the equivalent, according to the Bank of England, of $30 million today.

Ronnie's second wife and their two children — Charlotte Cornwell, an actress who was the model for his protagonist in "The Little Drummer Girl," and Rupert Cornwell, now the correspondent in Bonn for London's Financial Times — washed up in an aunt's house with two pounds, 12 shillings, sixpence, or about $12. For years thereafter, Ronnie's appearances in the lives of all

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his children tended to be furtive and brief. Sometimes, Rupert recalls, he would be summoned to an obscure railway hotel where his father would be registered under an alias. Bankruptcy did not keep Ronnie from showing up at David's wedding and, having signed a tab with his usual flourish, ordering champagne for all the guests. Nor, at a later date, when his son was struggling along on £13 a week as a teacher at Eton, did it prevent Ronnie from sending him a new Ford, supplied without a down payment by a gullible car dealer in Wales.

The Ford came with the license plate RC 4, suggesting it was just one in Ronald Cornwell's fleet, but the son, in what amounted to a declaration of independence, sent it back. "He was very angry about my returning it," David said, "because for him that meant I didn't have the faith that he would keep up the payments. He thought my reasons were economic, whereas they were emotional, but if there is any logic to money at all, you really cannot accept a brand new car from a chap who's a bankrupt."

For the next 20 years, the son mostly dodged the father and the bitter emotions he evoked. "I was just so busy defending myself," he said, "that I wouldn't allow him in, and that was what really enraged him, how I ceased to weep when he wept. Because it was almost family law that at a meeting or a departure, you wept."

And yet, as sons do, he could feel his father inside himself. Ronnie had his secret world, and the son, making his excursions into another kind of secret world under the tutelage of surrogate fathers — those fathers whose lives and personalities would later be refracted into characters like George Smiley — came to realize he had inherited some of Ronnie's traits and that they made him effective in government service. "The bargaining, the seduction in the foreign service life, the business of making people say more than they want, of befriending where you would not befriend unless they had information or access or influence that you wanted, I found all of those things horri-

David Cornwell knew that he had charm, but charm, Ronnie's charm, was a characteristic he viewed as deeply corrupt, more to be resisted, even exorcised, than used. "I was appalled by the effect that charm could have because he had nothing else but charm," he said.

THE PERCEPTION of these symmetries had much to do with David Cornwell's departure from government service and the view of the secret world that shaped his voice as a writer. It also has kept him lurking in the shadow cast by John le Carré, unwilling to step onto a public stage. "I am absolutely appalled by my public performances," he said. "I loathe myself on television and hope never to appear there again."

Finally, in "A Perfect Spy," the symmetries become more than background. They provide the book's structure, subject and theme. "You know what I feel?" a breathless C.I.A. man, bent on exposing Magnus Pym as a double agent, asks in its pages. "I think if Magnus's writing ever worked for him, he'd have been okay." There is a personal reference here but it needs to be worked out carefully. Obviously, this is not John le Carré saying that David Cornwell could have become a traitor. It is not betrayal, in any case, that Cornwell sees in the character who more or less serves as his alter ego. It is obedience: Pym is obedient to too many masters.

As might be expected in a le Carré novel, the perfect spy turns out to be a pathetic figure and a hypocrite. Magnus's hypocrisy can be seen as less forgivable than that of his father, Rick, but less forgivable than the hypocrisy of either father or son is that of the secret institutions Magnus serves. Top officials meeting in Whitehall are more concerned in "A Perfect Spy" with saving face with the Americans than they are with saving the lives of agents who may be compromised. With Magnus and Rick — as with Ronnie — appearances matter most. Public morality and private reality reflect each other. The novel seems to suggest that the best con men can be found holding power in governments. The difference is that where Rick left his tradesmen with unpaid bills, the institutions leave their agents dead.

Looking at the secret world, which is so much less secret than it was when he started writing, Cornwell is inclined to go a step further and argue that public morality now shapes private morality, including the morality of spies. That is why, he argues, there has been such an apparent epidemic of treason and defection. "If you can rewrite international law to suit your own purposes," he said, "you can hardly then expect the people you employ not to rewrite the morality of their own position."

The argument struck me as interesting but too neat. Was the morality of the secret world really worse now, I asked, than it was 30 years ago? Maybe not worse, Cornwell replied, but just more public. The real difference, he thought, between now and then was in the flagrant failures of Western agencies, notably the Central Intelligence Agency, to "handle" people. No agent in the old days would lose a defector in a Georgetown restaurant the way the C.I.A. lost Vitaly Yurchenko, the K.G.B. defector, last November. The official con man's basic skills as a "handler" have waned as a result, he theorized, of an obsession with high-tech espionage.

AFTER HIS SPECTACULAR bankruptcy in London, Ronnie had to travel farther afield — to Asia and the United States — to find investors for his schemes. One year he would turn up in Singapore, trying to sell the authorities on a plan for betting pools; the next, in New York with an idea for a convention center in the Bahamas. Like the cricket bats the Australians autographed, John le Carré's books became an asset on which Ronnie could trade. He ordered copies by the hundreds, signing them with a flourish, "From the author's father." His son doubts he ever really read one, that he ever really read any book.

Remarkably, his old debts still unpaid, Ronnie managed to re-establish himself in London in a new marriage and a new office in Jermyn Street. The office had a letterhead proclaiming it to be the international headquarters of a dozen companies. He was sitting there one day when his daughter Charlotte burst in to ask why she had to wait until the age of 25 to discover from a family lawyer that he had been to jail. "It's an absolute lie," Ronnie said.

Charlotte, on whom he doted, would suddenly in those years, when she was struggling as an actress, spot his bald head from the stage. "If your parents are proud of you, I think you forgive anything," she says. Occasionally it happened that a first-class air ticket would arrive in the mail with a summons to Paris. After a splendid lunch, father and daughter would go to the races and root from

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Ronnie said he owned. His son Rupert, who was working in those days as a correspondent in Paris, recalls that when he was invited to meet his father there, it was usually at the Ritz bar.

When he died while watching a televised cricket match in 1975, Ronnie had at least two cars, the Jermyn Street office, an apartment at a good Chelsea address, a country house near Maidenhead, two race horses — all held in the name of his bogus companies — and no assets.

"Nobody could find enough money in his wallet or anywhere to pay a single member of his staff for that week," David said. "There was no money, period. All the helpers, assistants and employees at his office were going through the papers like crazy looking for one little bit of money. It was like the end of 'Zorba the Greek,' all those dreadful widow women in black coming in, but they never found a thing."

David Cornwell paid for the cremation and memorial service but boycotted the service. Charlotte, who imagines that her father might have had to face prison again if he hadn't died then, was so offended by her half-brother's absence that she didn't talk to him for nearly two years. Now she says she respects him for his honesty.

"Dad would have been delighted to have a book," she says of "A Perfect Spy." Switching into her own Ronnie Cornwell voice, she then gave vent to the mock protests her father might have made. "I don't know where he got the idea for this," she huffed. "It's absolutely not true." Switching back to her own voice: "Deep down, he would have been thrilled."

David Cornwell's three sons from his marriage to Ann remain close to him. He has a fourth son by his second wife, the former book editor Jane Eustace. And, as he grows older, Charlotte and Rupert both say their half-brother, though taller and slimmer than Ronnie, increasingly resembles his father. That symmetry, carried to its logical extreme in the novel where Pym portrays himself as "a failing con man tottering on the last legs of his credibility," fortunately blurs in real life. But all Ronnie's offspring still feel his presence, and the mystery still unfolds. Rupert Cornwell, with the same initials as his father, braces himself for trouble whenever an immigration officer hesitates over his passport. The question, "Are you any relation to Ronald Cornwell," can still sometimes be the prologue to a hitherto unknown saga of debts and unpaid bills.

David Cornwell heard it last in November when he handed his credit card to a clerk at the Imperial Hotel in Vienna. "Cornwell, Cornwell. Is that a common name in England?" the man asked.

"Spelled that way, no, not very," he replied.

"But John le Carré's father was called Cornwell."

"Yes, I believe he was," the author conceded, intending to leave it at that. Then, softening, he owned up to being himself.

"You treated your father very badly," the man commented. "*Ja*, such a nice gentleman, you could have given him money."

As always, Cornwell gets the accents just right as he relates his story. As always, his father had left behind autographed copies of his books. Altogether out of the ordinary was the fact that Ronnie owed no money to the clerk, an old drinking companion. "So how is he?" the man now asked.

"Well, I'm sorry to tell you he's dead," the son replied. Finishing his narration, he says, "I left him in a state of mourning."

In his own personal history, the new novel serves as a catharsis for David Cornwell rather than a final judgment on the father. "I still don't know him," the son acknowledged. "He remains a foreign country." Yet he hopes that many sons and many fathers will recognize their own histories in that of Magnus and Rick Pym.

"There's a feeling I have very much," he said, "I think many fathers have it, that somehow we are there *not* to pass on the things we inherited from our own fathers." ■

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