

*A Legacy of Spies* by John Le Carré (Viking)

This is, by my count, Le Carré's twenty-sixth novel, in a writing life extending from 1961 to the present. Possibly his best-known novel is his third, *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold*, of 1963. It is not the least of the virtues of this latest work to send one back to that early masterpiece. For, though *A Legacy of Spies* can stand on its own perfectly well, it leans heavily on the earlier novel for its backstory, and I found myself rereading *The Spy* the moment I'd finished *A Legacy of Spies*, this time with the added pleasure of knowing where it was all going to lead in the 44 intervening years.

Where it leads to is a little farm in Brittany, where Peter Guillam, ex-member of George Smiley's stable of spies at the Circus, headquarters of the Secret Intelligence Service, is trying to live a quiet life. Guillam, in his day one of the lustiest and randiest of spies, is now a septuagenarian of retired though not celibate habits, and is not pleased to receive a summons to London, to his old employers, in accordance with his "*lifelong duty to attend, should Circus needs dictate.*"

Arriving in London, Guillam discovers that Circus needs dictate that he divulge all he can remember of Operation Windfall, a "British deception operation ... mounted against the East German Intelligence Service (Stasi) in the late nineteenth fifties and early sixties [that] resulted in the death of the best British secret agent I ever worked with and of the innocent woman for whom he gave his life." The agent in question is Alec Leamas, the *Spy Who Came in from the Cold*, and the woman is his lover, Liz Gold.

It transpires that the moral climate in London has changed: where during the Cold War the deaths of innocent people could be discounted as the necessary price for the defence of democratic values, nowadays the innocent people or their progeny demand compensation from the faceless bureaucracy that caused or sanctioned the deaths. But the agents of justice need to put a face on the facelessness, and Guillam's is the one that comes up: he is being sued for one million euros by the surviving son of Alec Leamas. To save his skin, he must tell the story of Operation Windfall.

So Guillam, who hardly features in the earlier novel, takes centre stage, and we are given the same events, or many of the same events, from a very different angle. Leamas is now a legendary character, and even the villains of that piece – the vile Hans-Dieter Mundt, the enigmatic Fiedler, the treasonous Bill Haydon – have gone to their deserts. The Circus has moved to a concrete monstrosity on the Thames, and the functionaries interrogating Guillam are young, breezy, cocksure. Some of the best scenes in the novel are those between the senior Secret Service Lawyer – named Bunny! – and a taciturn, wily Guillam, the one all perky insincere charm, the other all surly evasiveness. But slowly the story of Operation Windfall emerges, as grippingly as the first time, this time with additional material in the person of "Tulip", an East German defector Guillam was in love with.

The theme both novels have in common is explicated at the end of this one by Peter Guillam, in a conversation with a reclusive Smiley: "[H]ow much of our human feeling can we dispense with in the name of freedom, would you say, before we cease to feel either human or free?"

If that question resonates in the age of Trump, Smiley's own question does so no less eloquently, in the age of Brexit: "So was it all for *England* then? [...] But *whose* England? *Which* England? England all alone, a

citizen of nowhere? I'm a European, Peter. If I had a mission -- if I was ever aware of one beyond our business with the enemy, it was to Europe. [...] If I had an unattainable ideal, it was of leading Europe out of her darkness towards a new age of reason. I have it still."

Is it fanciful to see in Smiley's testament the 86-year-old Le Carré's own credo?