



# SPOOKS

Revolution, Wiretaps, Self-Pity and Martinis

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By Henry Allen

You realize the blonde is in on it, too.

She is sitting at the bar at the Class Reunion, where a lot of spook types hang out—Intertel, CIA, FBI, ex-any-or-all of them—and she's listening to two guys talk.

"Life is living and dying," one says to her.

She listens. These guys wear gray glen-plaid suits and breathe constant streams of cigarette smoke. They never move their heads, as if they know someone's watching them, and they're deciding whether to kill him or not.

"That's the whole thing," the other one says.

You keep waiting for her to make an excuse and leave. Then you realize she likes it, and it's going to be a long afternoon for the three of them, Martinis and Frank Sinatra singing, "All or Nothing at All" on the sound system.

"So many of these people are trying to live their lives as Grade B movies," says Jim Hougan, at a table. Hougan just published "Spooks," a chronicle,

expose and sometime celebration of private intelligence agents, "sober art-security specialists and banker spies, grim 'protectionists,' trembling ex-G-men, conspiracy theorists and oil-dipped Texans on a paramilitary binge," as he writes.

So many of them are in Washington. "Washington is a town where secrets are your capital," Hougan says.

"You take some guy writing a thesis at Harvard on medieval lit, and he's worried he'll end up in a suburb. Guys like that ran away to Paris in the '30s. Since World War II, they've run away to Langley."

Sinatra keens into "Strangers in the Night." A mouse dashes under some back tables. "Both ends against the middle," one of the guys at the bar is saying to the blonde. It could be any one of a bunch of spook haunts—

See SPOOKS, B4, Col. 3

Mad magazine's "Spy vs Spy" by Antonio Prohins, left, and right, Jim Hougan, by Ken Felt—The Washington Post



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SPOOKS, From B1

Washington has them the way other towns have literary cafes.

"I really do believe this country has a secret history, and some of these people have the keys to it," Hougan says. He lights another Marlboro—he smokes a lot, with thin, almost frail fingers he keeps moving as if he's trying to wrap them around the cigarettes. He's 35, with a goatee and sly, gentle eyes.

"But they're so one-dimensional, so preoccupied with their conception of themselves, fulfilling public expectation. It's fashionable among them to describe it all as drudgery; but after four or five beers, which is to say around 11:30 a.m., you see they're immensely excited by it. On the other hand, there's the spy at the bar, in his cups because of the terrible things he's seen in Vietnam—that kind of self-pity."

Hougan himself is no stranger to romance, having plied the writer's trade on Mediterranean islands such as Ibiza and Mykonos, or in Madison, Wis., in 1969 when university towns were where things were happening. In 1973 he joined the hip diaspora by moving to Wiscasset, Maine, where he wrote a book entitled "Decadence — Radical Nostalgia, Narcissism and Decline in the '70s."

He located the same themes in the twilight zone of espionage, exploring them, oddly enough, in a good-humored style that tips its hat to the pulp now and then, a melange of proper nouns and buzz words. Howard Hughes, exploding telephones, "a big-breasted bimbo of unusual appetites," fugitive tycoon Robert Vesco, beaches "white as Oxydol," a Chinese Jew in a kill, dart guns, a six-inch stack of hundred-dollar bills, Hughes' henchman Robert Mahen, Washington's own Lucien "Black Luigi" Conein, who has served in the French Foreign Legion, the OSS, CIA and the Drug Enforcement Administration.

This zone gets dangerous, says Hougan—its inhabitants have fought for failing regimes in Africa, plotted revolutions, tapped wires for Jimmy Hoffa and stolen IBM computer plans. Of course, it's easy to forget that a lot of what Hougan writes about is failed fantasy.

"Wading ashore from rubber rafts, the mercenaries were to proceed with their assault rifles to a Tripoli prison, sarcastically code-named 'The Hilton.' Bursting through its gates, the mercenaries would blast their way past the guards. . . . Except that this plot against Libya was squelched by British and American intelligence services, Hougan points out. Or closer to home, Hougan writes:

In meetings at Duke Zolbert's restaurant, the Class Reunion bar, and [Mitch] WerBell's \$95-a-day suite at Washington's Hay-Adams Hotel, CIA veterans, free-lance spooks and libertarian idealists agreed upon a New Year's resolution" that would wrest the island of Abaco free of the Bahamas.

But Mitch WerBell — sometimes called "the wizard of whispering death" for his invention of the silenced Ingram submachine gun—got enmeshed, as he is wont to, in other legal difficulties, which were subsequently resolved in his favor.

"I hear that Mitch is working for the National Caucus of Labor Committees now," says Hougan, referring to a militant, volatile group which once claimed it was about to demolish the "Hoover-Carter-CIA-controlled proto-fascist state."

"You go up to Mitch WerBell's room at the Hay-Adams, when he's in town," Hougan recalls. "He'll have, say, six buckets of ice with beers sticking out of them, a bottle of Scotch, steak tartare, some kind of strange magazine, like Spotlight, on the table, a lot of tricky spy-tech stuff around—tiny tape recorders or one of his machine guns. "He'll preside over a court situa-

tion, trading gossip with some ex-CIA guy—and always with good humor."

Another time, Hougan says, "I saw him give a guy a pill. He said, 'Just take it, it's a vitamin.' Then he said he'd been lying, to scare the hell out of the guy. It turned out to be a pill that would turn the guy's urine bright red."

One ex-CIA type threatened to bomb Hougan, claiming he was KGB—but only after Hougan told him he wouldn't need him for the book.

Hougan tips the cellophane off a new pack of cigarettes. Frank Sinatra sings. "Call me, maybe it's late, but just call me . . ." The guys at the bar have taken off their jackets, but they're still keeping their eyes snugged and dead behind chronically narrowed lids. And the blonde is listening.

"What happens when the intrigue stops?" Hougan says. "That's one reason they drink so heavily. At one time a guy's working in the Berlin tunnel—then he's controlling the lines outside a movie theater.

"I saw a guy in Falls Church who knew a lot about a murder and some wiretapping I needed to know about. He'd just got out of jail. It was Sunday, around 4 p.m. The guy answers the door in his pajamas, his hands are shaking. . . ."