

The Midnight Swimmer

Edward Wilson

Edward Wilson is a native of Baltimore. He studied International Relations on a US Army scholarship. He later served as a Special Forces officer in Vietnam. He was decorated for his part in rescuing wounded Vietnamese soldiers from a minefield. After leaving the Army, Wilson became an expatriate and gave up US nationality to become a British citizen. He has also lived and worked in Germany and France. He is the author of three novels, *A River in May*, *The Envoy* and *The Darkling Spy*, all published by Arcadia Books. The author now lives in Suffolk where he taught English and Modern Languages for thirty years.

For all my former students with fondest thanks.

*Mama take this badge from me
I can't use it anymore
It's getting dark too dark to see
Feels like I'm knockin' on heaven's door...*

Bob Dylan

*Already darkness, and the end is in sight:
Ophelia crying in an empty hut.
And Hamlet walks to and fro with white headband
in order to be recognized by the Ghost in the gloom.*

‘On the Sea-Shore, Smell of Iodine’

Regina Derieva

Near Brentford Essex. March, 1962

Galen's body was uncooperative, even resentful. It seemed to want to stay curled up on the back seat of the Ford enjoying the after-effects of a bottle of single malt whisky laced with sedatives. It's the sort of cocktail you have when you are worried about losing your job and when your love life is a complete mess. At least that was the back story they were hoping to spread. People usually don't commit suicide when life is smelling of roses.

Catesby and Bone were wearing surgical gloves. The plan was to leave as little evidence for the forensic team as possible. It was part of the game. Catesby put his arms under the corpse's shoulders and began to slide the body off the red fake-leather seat.

'Get his legs, Henry, and don't bloody drop them.'

'Who would have thought he was so heavy?'

In life Galen had been a small man with soft features, he seemed to gain most of his nourishment from whisky and porn. Catesby, who had ample experience shifting cadavers, was surprised at the body's heaviness. Maybe, he thought, it was the weight of all those secrets that he was taking to the grave.

'I can't see the footpath,' said Bone.

'Okay, let's swap positions.' Catesby looked at the gravel beneath his feet. It seemed shiny in the moonlight. 'No, don't. If we put him down here his suit might pick up grease from the car park. Just go straight ahead.'

'I see a signpost.'

'That's it.'

Catesby knew that the footpaths of Weald Park were well marked. He often stopped there for his sandwiches when driving between London and his home in Suffolk. The landscaping of the estate, including the lake and deer park, had been carried out in the eighteenth century in the style of Capability Brown. The result was a setting of exceeding beauty and peace – the perfect place to dump a body.

‘Can you manage, Henry?’

‘I’m fine,’ said Bone. He seemed to have got his bearings.

‘You ought to come here during the day. It’s the sort of place you would like. You could bring your sketchbook.’ It wasn’t often that Catesby had the chance to patronise his boss and order him around, but body disposal was a job where the field operative was in charge.

The footpath was wide and well trod which was why Catesby had chosen it. He didn’t want the cops to pick out suspicious footprints or disturbed undergrowth.

‘How much further?’ said Bone.

‘There’s a beech grove off to the left – we’ll take him in there. You ought to see the bluebells in the spring.’ Catesby had once made love there. The woman had told him she’d always dreamed of making love on a bed of bluebells. Beech forests were picture-book romantic. They were dark and private, but had little undergrowth to catch the hems of dresses.

‘Turn off here. Don’t let his feet drag.’ They continued for about ten yards. ‘Here is fine. Lay him on his back.’

‘Enough heavy lifting for the day. Would you like a drink?’

‘Are you talking to me?’ said Catesby.

‘Very funny.’

‘I thought it was.’

Bone reached for his hipflask and passed it over. He never laughed at Catesby’s ‘jokes’.

Catesby sipped the brandy. It was good stuff, twenty-five-year-old VSOP. Bone even had a bottle from 1812 and had once let Catesby have the tiniest sip. It was pale and had lost all its flavour. ‘Not for drinking,’ explained Bone at the time, ‘I keep it for its rarity. But now you can say you’ve tasted brandy looted from Napoleon’s stores.’

Catesby looked down at the body. Only the collar of Galen’s white shirt and a tiny glint from his glasses were visible in the gloom. He seemed already to have melted into the earth. ‘Can’t we just leave him the way he is?’

‘No, the drug that killed him won’t show up in the post-mortem – and the whisky and barbiturates he’s ingested aren’t sufficient on their own to cause death. If the pathologists mess around long enough they just might discover traces of VX. It’s not likely, but we can’t risk it.’

‘I think we should just leave him as he is.’

‘No, we’ve already decided. You didn’t forget the knife, did you?’

‘No.’

Catesby reached in his coat pocket for the American switchblade. It was sealed in an envelope so it wouldn’t pick up fibres from his clothes. He tore the paper open and removed the knife. ‘I suppose you want me to cut him?’

‘You’ve got steadier hands and better eyes.’

‘By the way, was Galen left-handed or right-handed?’

Bone picked up both dead hands and compared them. ‘Right-handed, the fingers are slightly thicker.’

Catesby carefully put the knife in Galen’s right hand and moulded the fingers around the handle to leave fingerprints.

‘Cut the veins in the wrist lengthwise.’

‘How the bloody hell do you expect me to find them in the dark? In any case, you can’t get veins up on a corpse.’

‘Just find the two tendons at the base of the palm – slash up between them.’

The knife was sharp and easily penetrated the flesh. Catesby opened a deep gash about three inches long.

‘Now,’ said Bone, ‘comes the hard part. Do you want to go first?’

‘Okay.’ Catesby leaned over the corpse and started doing closed cardiac heart massage. When amateurs try to make an assassination look like a slit-wrist suicide they often forget that dead bodies don’t bleed. ‘How’s he doing?’

‘It’s coming out, but only a trickle. Pump harder, but don’t crack a rib.’

The two men worked in turns. It took nearly three hours to push out enough blood to create a credible suicide scene. Both men were covered in sweat.

Bone wiped his brow and said, 'I'm sure that's enough.'

Catesby reached into his coat pocket for the theatre props: an empty whisky bottle and pill packets. They had already covered the items with Galen's fingerprints. He arranged them next to the body. And then for the *pièce de résistance*, a pair of frilly women's knickers that he draped over Galen's face.

Bone stared at their handiwork with his hands in his pockets.

'I think,' said Catesby, 'the knickers are too much.'

'Leave them. It means the Americans will do all the more to keep it out of the papers.'

'They're not going to believe it in any case. If he was going to top himself, why didn't he do it in his own flat?' They had, in fact, considered staging it there, but there were access problems and too many nosy neighbours.

Bone shrugged. 'That's not our problem. It's a problem for the coroner. Let's go.'

They made their way back to the cars. Bone had followed Catesby in an Austin 30 with fake number plates in case they got spotted by a curious member of the public. The plates traced the car to a minor East End villain. They obviously had to leave Galen's big left-hand drive Ford – with its US Diplomatic Corps number plates – near the scene of death.

'The setting is quite apt,' said Bone as he slid into the tiny Austin.

'Why's that?'

'This is where Claudius defeated the ancient Britons in 44 AD. I suppose you could say we've got our own back.'

Catesby looked at Bone in awe. He suspected, not for the first time, that beneath Bone's polished exterior of Whitehall mandarin lurked the soul of a wily rebel.

Berlin. October, 1960

Back then, Catesby didn't even know that Galen existed. Like a lot of these things, you only see the connections through the hindsight telescope. But it wouldn't have made any difference. Catesby wasn't the playwright, he was just one of the players – like Andreas, Katya and Zhenka. Sure, you could improvise a bit if you fluffed your lines, but the final act was still going to be the same. The prince was still going to die.

It didn't take Catesby long to realise that Andreas was a sleazy spiv. This wasn't a rare species in post-war Berlin. As soon as the shooting stopped, chancer spivs like Andreas popped up all over the city like mushrooms after a wet summer. They were still popping up fifteen year later. As an intelligence officer, Catesby had grown to like the Berliner spivs. They were honest about being dishonest. They were easy to handle because they were primarily motivated by money and pleasure. Sure, they could be cruel and vicious too – but maybe that was just a form of pleasure. The worst characters to deal with were agents with political axes to grind. They had secret agendas that you couldn't control.

It was much more difficult to be a spiv in East Berlin than West Berlin. Basically, there was a lot less stuff to nick and fewer rich people to cheat or buy your black market swag. For this reason the spivs in the East usually turned to the spy game.

To be fair, Andreas didn't really want to be a spiv or a spy. He wanted to be an actor. He went to drama school and wore a black roll-neck jumper and a fake leather jacket. He tried to hang around with the Bertolt Brecht crowd, but they didn't want to hang around with him. Andreas wasn't too popular with his drama school tutors either. They thought he was lazy and ideologically unsound – or as one suggested, 'an arrogant little bourgeois shit'. In due course, the school director convened a meeting where Andreas was told that 'he needed to become better acquainted with the working class'.

Catesby didn't think that two years in an opencast coalmine had given Andreas more respect for the proletariat, but it certainly gave him

more respect for the power of the authorities. Catesby actually approved of the DDR's way of dealing with problem students. But this, like many of his views, was one that Catesby had to keep under his hat. In fact, even saying DDR, shorthand for Deutsche Demokratische Republik, had become a problem. Catesby had been told not to call it that in front of Americans. The Yanks always called it East Germany. When Brits said DDR, American eyebrows were raised. It was as if using the country's official name suggested being 'soft on communism'. It was the ideological version of 'tomaytoes' versus 'tomahtoes'.

Andreas never made it big as an actor so he became a whore. He liked his new job even better than acting. There were no boring lines to memorise and he was paid a lot more, but not by the women he made love to. He was paid by the MfS, the East German secret intelligence service.

His first assignments were exchange students whom he was supposed to recruit to spy on their home countries when they returned. But his most important seduction happened quite by chance. At first, he was drawn to her by attraction and desire. It never occurred to Andreas that she was going to be part of his job as an MfS 'Romeo' agent. She was simply an elegant woman he had met at the debut of a film in which he had had a small role. She seemed lonely, sad – and quite bored with the party. Andreas knew that she was a Russian, but only later did he discover that she was the most important Russian wife in Berlin.

The affair began a week later. The woman had invited Andreas for tea to an address in East Berlin's most exclusive quarter. The address turned out to be a large and luxurious flat. The first thing that Andreas noticed when he was let in was a pair of black army boots in the entrance hall. His disappointment grew when he saw a Soviet Army officer's greatcoat hanging from a hook above the boots. The shoulder boards on the coat bore the rank insignia of a lieutenant-general. Disappointment turned to curiosity. The coat obviously belonged to one of the highest ranking Soviet officers in the DDR.

The woman saw Andreas staring at the military apparel. 'They're my husband's, but he's not here. He's always working. We are alone.'

Andreas followed the woman into a sitting room where a samovar was bubbling on a sideboard. It wasn't long, however, before the tea things were pushed aside and the pair were writhing with passion on the sofa. Andreas soon had her dress up around her waist and was about to have her then and there, but she stopped him. Her face was flushed. 'No,' she said.

'No?'

'I mean not here,' she said. 'Let's go into the bedroom.'

The rest of the afternoon was the maddest and hungriest lovemaking that Andreas had ever experienced. The woman clutched him with an almost deranged yearning as she finally shuddered to a prolonged orgasm. And it wasn't long before they began again. Andreas was a little frightened by her passion. He felt that she was never going to let go. But after an hour of rosy madness she did let go and pushed Andreas away a little so she could see his eyes.

'You must think,' she said, 'that I am a little strange.'

'Strangely wonderful.'

'In a way I have been very lonely. Today was the first time ... the first time that I had an orgasm in years.'

'Why?'

'Don't ask, I'm not going to tell you. And do not think that I've been completely unhappy.'

'But not for so many years ...'

'Do you believe me?'

'Yes, of course.'

The woman smiled bleakly.

'I don't even know your name.'

'Katya. It's a short form of Ekaterina.'

'Your husband ...'

'Don't talk about my husband.'

'Sorry.'

‘I’m sorry I snapped at you.’ She looked away at an ornate mantel clock that featured a nineteenth-century hunter and his hound. ‘I think you must be going now.’

‘Will we meet again?’

She kissed him.

As she led him to the door Andreas looked once more at the Soviet greatcoat with the lieutenant-general’s insignia. He knew he had to see her again.

Andreas reported his tryst with Katya to his MfS agent handler the very next day. If she had been an ordinary Russian woman with a husband who had a dreary post in trade or transport, he would have kept the affair to himself. But he knew from the uniform that her spouse must be one of the most important Soviet officers in Berlin.

‘He must,’ said Andreas, ‘be at least a corps commander.’

The agent handler was going through a large file. ‘What did you say the address was?’

Andreas told him again.

The handler turned another page in the file and ran his finger down a list. Suddenly the MfS man’s face turned white.

‘What is it?’

‘Fuck.’

‘You found him.’

The agent handler looked across the desk at Andreas. ‘You’ve just been shagging the wife of Yevgeny Ivanovich Alekseev.’

‘Who’s he?’

‘He’s head of the bloody fucking KGB.’

‘In the world?’

‘No, silly, in Berlin. The Russians call him the *rezident*. It means chief of the *rezidentura*, the KGB station – and the Berlin *rezidentura* is one of the most important stations in the world. This guy, Andreas, is one big fish.’

‘Should I continue to see his wife?’

‘That could be scary – I’d better clear it with the boss.’

The op request went straight to the desk of Mischa Wolf, the Head of the HVA – the foreign intelligence branch of the MfS. In fact, it was Mischa's film director brother, Koni Wolf, who had recruited Andreas in the first place. The brothers enjoyed a symbiotic relationship. Mischa protected Koni's artistic freedom and Koni provided Mischa a steady stream of B to Z grade actors to serve as 'Romeo agents' and 'honey traps'.

Mischa twirled his reading glasses and looked out the plate-glass window of his Normanenstrasse office over the dreary cityscape of Berlin. The important thing was that Andreas was not an official MfS officer. He was an IM, an *Inoffizieller Mitarbeiter*. The IMs were a small army of 'unofficial' part-timers who were paid in cash and favours. They were often recruited to do dirty tricks for which the State could deny responsibility. And when it came to seducing the wives of high-ranking Soviet officials stationed in East Berlin, the lack of a formal connection to the MfS was essential. Maintaining fraternal DDR/USSR relations was important, but so was knowing the secrets that Moscow was keeping from Berlin. In many ways spying on allies was just as important as spying on enemies. Mischa decided to authorise the op.

As soon as Andreas's agent handler received the go-ahead, he arranged a series of training sessions. The first step was to teach Andreas how to use a Minox miniature camera for copying documents. Ideally, there should be a four-legged copy stand to keep the camera in place, but this would make concealment and speed difficult. Andreas was instructed to hold the camera as steady as possible and to use any available light from a lamp or window.

'You're shaking too much,' said the handler as they tried a few practice snaps.

'I can't help it.'

'Try breathing out, it helps keep the hands steady. We teach snipers the same technique.'

When the training was finished Andreas was given a new Minox B that could be traced back to a factory in West Germany by its serial number. There was also West German film to use with it. If Andreas was caught, the camera's origins would suggest he was working for a Western intelligence agency. But, of course, Western agencies supplied their own agents spy gadgets of East bloc origins for the same reason. The agent handler knew that the bluff and double bluff procedures fooled no one in the trade, but it was vitally important that nothing in Andreas's possession pointed back to the East German state.

Oddly, Andreas found that his new role as a honey trap whore gave him more confidence as a lover. It meant that he was no longer, as he had felt before, the inferior, less attractive partner in the relationship. It also gave the lovemaking a certain slightly kinky frisson. At first Andreas had felt that Katya was using him, now he felt that he was using her. Otherwise he would have fallen hopelessly in love with her.

Katya was so intelligent that Andreas sometimes forgot that she was also beautiful. But he also found her intelligence unsettling. Katya wasn't just an intellectual who embarrassed him with her learning, but also a sharply perceptive woman. When Andreas suggested they have a lovemaking session at his flat, as his MfS handler had suggested, Katya firmly declined with a knowing sparkle in her eye. She wasn't a fool. Ekaterina Alekseeva hadn't been married to a KGB general for fifteen years without learning a few trade secrets. She wasn't certain that her lover was a spy, but she was certain that Andreas's flat would have a secret camera over the bed that had been installed with or without his knowledge. In the espionage swamp of Berlin there were predators lying in wait behind every bush – and Katya knew she was a trophy prey.

At first, Andreas was more than nervous about making love in the marital flat. He was terrified that at any moment the bedroom door would fling open and Lieutenant General Alekseev would be waving a black Makarov 9mm automatic in his face. If he wasn't executed on the spot, Andreas suspected that he would be bundled off to the huge Karlshorst compound where the Soviets enjoyed extra-territorial

sovereignty. What awaited him there would be far worse than a bullet between the eyes – or legs. But as the months went by, the door remained closed and their lovemaking remained undisturbed. Andreas began to realise that Yevgeny Alekseev was *un mari complaisant*, a husband who turned a blind eye. It certainly explained the separate bedrooms and the fact the *resident* was seldom at home even in the evenings. It then occurred to Andreas that Katya was, in fact, using him more than he was using her. The realisation made him angry, but it also made him love her all the more. He now knew that his love was hopeless and that he must do whatever was possible to profit from the affair before it ended.

Andreas found Katya the cleanest and most hygienic woman that he had ever been with. She spent a long time in the bathroom preparing herself for lovemaking – and she always fragrant – and a long time in the bathroom afterwards too. As Katya luxuriated in the bath bubbles of a pre-coital *toilette intime*, Andreas took out the camera and searched the bedroom for things to photograph. Katya was just as tidy with her things as with her body and never left paperwork lying about, but there was a writing desk with a locked drawer. The lock proved easy to pick – his MfS handler had taught him that skill as well. The top drawer was full of letters from her mother and siblings. Andreas, who had studied compulsory Russian in school, wasn't fluent, but he could see that the letters were about family news that was mostly boring. Nonetheless, he photographed a selection of the letters; then opened a second drawer.

This drawer was more promising. It was full of photos – many of which seemed to have been taken at embassy receptions and *dacha* parties. Andreas was certain that the photos might identify high-ranking friends – as well as hitherto unknown KGB officers. He was sure that his agent handler would be impressed. Andreas snapped furiously until the roll of film was exhausted. When he heard Katya stirring from her bath, he hid the camera in the lining of his coat.

When Katya emerged from the bathroom she wasn't as made-up or slinkily dressed as usual. She was wearing a dressing gown and her

hair was done up in a towel. She spent a long time looking at Andreas with her head cocked to one side – as if she were inspecting a plucked hen on a butcher’s hook, a hen that had been there too long and gone off. Finally, Katya went over to the chair where Andreas had draped his coat. She went through the pockets and then felt the lining until she found the camera. Without saying a thing, she opened the camera and took out the film cartridge. She flicked open the cartridge with her thumbnail. She stared hard at Andreas as she unwound the film and exposed it. Katya crumpled up the ruined film into her fist and said, ‘I’ll burn it later.’ She then picked up the camera and handed it to Andreas. ‘I’m sure your boss will want this back. I wouldn’t want you to get in trouble.’

‘I’m sorry.’

Katya sat on the side of the bed and buried her face in her hands. Andreas sat down beside her, but without touching. He knew there was nothing he could say. Suddenly, he felt her stir next to him. Katya had slipped the dressing from her shoulder and exposed her nakedness. Her eyes had turned to cinders. She grabbed Andreas by his hair and pulled hard. ‘Come on,’ she said twisting his head downwards so that his face was in front of hers, ‘fuck me. You get paid for that too.’

The relationship continued, but things were never the same. Andreas realised a gulf had opened between them – and that the coolness and distancing were completely on Katya’s side. He began to feel the desolate pain of making love to someone who no longer loved him. Her coolness, of course, made him love her all the more. Andreas began to wonder if her continuing to see him was a form of punishment and revenge.

Andreas never told his agent handler what had happened. The handler, meanwhile, was becoming more and more disillusioned with a ‘Romeo’ who didn’t deliver results. ‘When,’ said the handler, ‘are you going to start using the camera? We’re not paying you to get laid, you know.’ At first, Andreas had been paid double the average DDR wage for a pleasant job that only took three or four hours a week. But his stipend as an IM had dwindled to less than beer money. In fact, Andreas

began to have serious worries about his future life. The DDR offered full employment in return for subsidised housing and food. But it was not a society that tolerated the work-shy. Andreas feared that his agent handler would report him as useless and lazy. He knew that he would be forced to take on a job in a factory or building site. His previous experience with the proletariat, his two years in an opencast coalmine, had not been a happy one. Maybe, he thought, it was time to pack up and leave for the West. The only thing holding him back was his love for Katya. And the only thing he loved more was money.

A common characteristic of spiv Berliner IMs like Andreas was their lack of loyalty and ideological commitment. Every agent handler, both East and West, knew this was a fact. None would have been surprised to learn that Andreas hated life in the DDR – and that he wanted to live in the West and drive a soft-top Mercedes. He was shallow. Which was fine, for it also meant that his moves and motivations were all the more predictable. But the big problem with greedy spies like Andreas was their tendency to go in for ‘double dipping’. A double dipper wasn’t a doubled agent. A double dipper was simply someone who sold the same intelligence to more than one agency in order to maximise profits. It happened all the time in Berlin in the days before the Wall. It was a very risky business, but one that paid huge returns if you got away with it. Andreas’s agent handler knew that his Romeo was a potential double dipper, but he still didn’t have anything to double dip with. The handler decided it was too soon to put Andreas under surveillance.

The next time he visited the flat it was obvious that something was wrong. Katya was in a strange mood – and Andreas could tell it had nothing to do with him. She didn’t even seem to notice that he was there. At first, Andreas thought that maybe she had taken a new lover. When he asked her, she simply shook her head and said, ‘No.’

‘What is it then?’

‘Nothing.’

‘Why are you so strange?’

‘Can’t you just let me be?’ She smiled, but it was artificial. ‘Let’s get in bed.’

The lovemaking was perfunctory. Katya seemed completely uninvolved, as if she were on another planet. As soon as it was over, Katya got out of bed. Andreas tried to embrace her, but she pushed him away and went into the bathroom for her post-coital wash. Andreas sat on the side of the bed feeling both confused and desolate. When he heard the sound of Katya vomiting behind the bathroom door, Andreas felt relieved. It explained why she had been so out of sorts – she wasn’t well. He listened to the toilet flushing, the bath water being drawn and then Katya sliding into the tub.

Andreas noticed something strange. Katya had left her writing desk open. He listened to the sound of her splashing and soaping in the tub. She couldn’t be watching from the keyhole. He had a quick ransack of the desk drawer – and realised there was nothing there that he hadn’t seen before. There was, however, a letter that she had begun to write – but it went no further than, *My dearest brother...* Andreas touched the paper: it was tear-stained. Something bad had happened.

It was then that Andreas noticed a book that was lying on Katya’s bedside table. He picked it up. It was a collection of Mayakovsky’s poetry – a favourite, apparently, of her husband. There was a bulge in the middle of the book – as if a bookmark had been inserted. But it wasn’t a bookmark, it was a letter. Despite his poor Russian, Andreas knew that he had hit the jackpot as soon as he read the first words. It was too good to be true. It was certainly far too good for his MfS handler, the mean bastard had cut his wages. Andreas decided then and there that only the West had pockets deep enough to pay for this gem. His love affair with Katya may have been doomed, but money was a balm that would soon soothe his broken heart.

