

The Secret Stain

Emily glanced at the waiter who stood behind her right shoulder. He tugged at the cork of a 2001 Dalwhinnie Moonambel Shiraz, then poured a fifth into her glass. After swirling the purple-crimson liquid, she inhaled the scent of crushed black fruits before taking a mouthful.

‘Hmm, it’s good,’ she sighed. ‘You can leave the bottle, thanks.’

Emily and Joanne sat opposite each other at their favourite local bar overlooking Elwood Beach. It was a dull, cold Sunday in late August and the fresh air had brought the colour to their cheeks. Each of them genuinely felt life was better with the other in it. The love they shared was obvious in their shared smiles and long adoring looks. They chatted, picked at the canapés, sipped wine, held hands and watched the fishermen on the pier with their lines in the water. Jet skis roared by offshore, much to the dismay of the fishermen who gestured frantically to the riders to leave.

Emily was a tall woman in her late twenties with penetrating dark eyes and blonde hair was pulled back from her oval face in a tight ponytail. She projected confidence. Her brown eyes seemed to assess her interlocutors with a look. She had recently completed her PhD in politics at Monash University and was now a tenure-track lecturer in the history department at LaTrobe.

Joanne’s eyes were blue, her face long, her mouth wide. Gentle and kind in disposition, which Emily found endearing, she was not afraid to speak her mind. Joanne was an aspiring poet, having graduated from Monash with an English degree. From their first meeting at the Main Dining Room at the Monash Campus Centre, Joanne had felt a connection that was almost electric. Sometimes she felt she was put on this earth for no reason other than to be with Emily.

Now she reached for her water and sipped to clear her throat. 'What are you reading at the moment?' she asked. 'Anything I'd like?'

'It's an article by Annie Jacobsen about Operation Paperclip.' Emily paused to sip her wine.

'Never heard of it.'

'It was a secret US intelligence program put in place after the war,' Emily replied. 'Between 1945 and 1959, the CIA moved more than sixteen hundred German scientists, engineers and technicians to the US.'

'Really?' asked Joanne.

'Really,' echoed Emily. 'And many of them were former members of the Nazi Party. Some were even members of the SS.'

'That's disgusting!' Joanne snorted. 'Why would they do that?'

Emily shrugged. 'Because of the Cold War. The Germans had developed superior jet-engine and missile technology. The Americans wanted to preserve their advantage over the Russians. But they were doing it too.'

'Who's they?' asked Joanne. 'The Russians?'

'Yep,' nodded Emily. 'In 1946, Stalin moved over two thousand German scientists and engineers along with six thousand of their family members to research facilities in Russia.'

'So it was all about the Cold War,' mused Joanne.

'You got it,' Emily confirmed. 'It all started just a couple of months after the end of the war in Europe. The US military organised Operation Overcast, a secret recruitment program designed to help shorten the war in the Pacific. The Germans were the first ones to use jet aircraft and ballistic missiles in combat. They were way ahead of American and British

technology. Then when Japan surrendered, the name of the game was staying ahead of the Russians.'

Joanne shook her head in disgust. 'That's appalling. Think about the survivors of the Holocaust and their relatives. Imagine how they must have felt – the pain it must have caused them.'

'They didn't know,' replied Emily. 'At least not in the beginning. It was a top-secret operation. But later, the press interviewed several scientists and started asking questions. The Pentagon then began to peddle the line that these were "good" Germans. Of course, that was total bullshit.'

'Jesus, Mother of Christ,' Joanne muttered as she bit her lower lip.

'Not what those Holocaust survivors would say, but I agree with the sentiment,' said Emily. 'So once the Pacific war was over, in November 1945, Operation Overcast was renamed Operation Paperclip. The name was derived from the paperclips attached to the folders of rocket experts that America sought to recruit.'

'Did President Truman know about this? I thought he was sympathetic to the Jews. He recognised Israel when it declared independence in 1948, didn't he?'

Emily sighed. 'Not only did he know about it, but he formally approved it. He authorised an expansion of Operation Paperclip to take in another one thousand German scientists.'

'How do you know all this?' asked Joanne, disgust and shock apparent in her voice.

'I'm teaching it this semester.'

'What is it about Americans?' Joanne said. 'What sort of morality do they have that they think it's okay to protect Nazi war criminals? Is it any wonder that a morally bankrupt person like Donald Trump can be elected

president? They live in Disneyland. They're openly hostile to anyone who is different from them, they have contempt for reputable news outlets, and they embrace the redistribution of wealth to those who have it at the continued expense of those who don't.'

Emily smiled and raised her glass and a corresponding smile spread across Joanne's face. She noticed the tip of her tongue touch her upper lip, and feeling Joanne's hand on her knee, Emily leaned in for a kiss.

'I remember how you tasted last night,' murmured Joanne with a shy smile. 'I can't remember ever being so taken by anyone.'

Emily smiled her Cheshire cat smile.

'I mean it,' Joanne repeated.

'I know,' said Emily. 'So do I.'

'But I want to hear more about Operation Paperclip,' Joanne continued.

'Okay,' said Emily. 'Well, after Stalingrad, it became clear that Germany was unable to defeat the Soviets. So, by early 1943, the German government began to recall scientists, engineers and technicians from combat to do research to bolster its weapons research programs. Just before the end of the war, a Polish laboratory assistant at the University of Bonn found a list of those scientists' names stuffed down a toilet. He passed it on to British intelligence which, in turn, gave it to the US military.'

'In a toilet?' giggled Joanne, her hand covering her mouth.

'In a toilet,' echoed Emily. 'A major in US army intelligence sent a message up the chain of command recommending the evacuation of these scientists and their families to America. He thought they could be of help in the war effort against Japan. So in July 1945, the American military began to move German rocket engineers to the US.'

'Like Werner von Braun?'

'Yes,' replied Emily. 'I'm impressed you know his name.'

'I'm a big Tom Lehrer fan,' grinned Joanna. "'Vonce de rockets are up, who cares vere dey come down. Dat's not my department said Wernher von Braun.'"

Emily struggled to contain a giggle. 'It's no laughing matter,' she said, trying to look stern.

'Right,' nodded Joanne with a twinkle in her eye. 'Sorry.'

'So the US then created something they called the Combined Intelligence Objectives Subcommittee. It targeted scientific, military and industrial personnel who could contribute to American technology. It was also tasked with finding out what technology the Germans may have passed onto Japan. They tried to prevent the emigration of German scientists to places like Spain, Argentina or Egypt, all of which had sympathised with Nazi Germany. It was all about getting their hands on these scientists before the Russians could get them, or they could scarper off to South America.'

'There are many things in this world I don't understand,' Joanne said with a grimace. 'And one of them is how the US could do such a thing. It's morally bankrupt.'

Emily shrugged. 'That's America for you. By 1947, they netted over 1,500 technicians and scientists and almost 4,000 of their family members. They were taken to villages in the German countryside and provided with stipends. In return, they had to report twice weekly to the local police station.'

Joanne sipped at her wine.

'They were in limbo until November 1947, when the US held a conference to consider their status. Some of them filed monetary claims against the United States over their detention and possible American violations of the Geneva Convention.'

'The nerve of those arseholes!' Joanne spat. 'By rights they should have been tried at Nuremberg for war crimes. Yet they turn around and sue because they're being kept in country villas?'

'Outrageous, I agree,' nodded Emily. 'And some more cynical voices have argued that Operation Paperclip was a great success because it deprived Germany of its best minds for three years, impeding the country's postwar reconstruction. But anyway, by 1950 many of the Paperclip specialists were given US citizenship or permanent residency. That meant Nazi scientists were able to enter the United States from Latin America.'

'How many are we talking?' asked Joanna.

'In all, around 1,600 scientists and engineers were brought to the US. Plus their families.'

Joanne shook her head in disbelief.

'It gets worse,' said Emma, forcing a smile that conveyed bitterness and cynicism in equal measures. 'Some of the bastards even won awards from NASA and the Defense Department.'

'Like von Braun?' Joanne grimaced.

'The US government would argue that Paperclip was necessary to contain Soviet expansionism. That these scientists achieved important scientific accomplishments.'

'But at what cost?' Joanne challenged.

'Indeed,' nodded Emily. 'The Americans say that Wernher von Braun was chief architect of the Saturn V launch vehicle. Without von Braun there

would have been no moon landing. And then there's Adolf Busemann, who designed the swept wing that improved aircraft performance at high speeds.'

There was a long silence. Emily glanced at the shore as the shadows of an early winter dusk fell across the pier.

'It's still disgusting,' said Joanna.

'Yeah,' replied Emily, 'but in 1963 Truman said that he never regretted approving Paperclip. At the time Stalin was imposing communism at gun point over eastern Europe.'

'Churchill's Iron Curtain.'

'Precisely,' agreed Emily. 'The Cold War was heating up and the US wanted to prevent the Soviets from accessing those German scientists and their knowledge.'

'So, were any of these Germans ever held to account?' asked Joanna.

'A few were investigated over their Nazi Party membership. But only one scientist was tried and he was acquitted. Another was linked to human experiments at the Ravensbrück concentration camp. But the CIA helped him escape to Argentina.'

Joanne shook her head. 'Unbelievable.'

'Then in 1984, rocket scientist Arthur Rudolph was accused of using slave labour to build the V-2 missiles at Peenemünde. He cut a deal with the US government to renounce his American citizenship and return to Germany, where he was never prosecuted.'

'So much for the new and democratic Germany,' Joanne sighed.

'The US weren't the only ones to import German scientists and technicians,' said Emily. 'The British got into the act as well. Like the US,

they were scared of Stalin and wanted to develop British military strength. Stalin was already breaking his promise to allow democratic elections in eastern Europe. So the British didn't trust the Kremlin's promise not to recruit German rocket scientists. And it was a Labour government in power then.'

'That's right,' nodded Joanna, 'Churchill lost the election of July 1945. Do you think he would have done the same?'

'Probably,' shrugged Emily. 'He certainly didn't trust Stalin and kept trying to convince Roosevelt that the Soviets would be a menace after the war with Germany was won.'

'You're probably right about Churchill.'

'So, in any event, the Brits organised the transfer of leading SS officers and Nazi scientists to Australia.'

'To Australia?' echoed Joanne in a tone of outraged disbelief.

'Yep,' nodded Emily. 'They codenamed it Matchbox. It was the mirror image of the US program. The object was to deny the Soviets access to some of the best German scientists, engineers and soldiers – and never mind their crimes under the Third Reich.'

Joanne's nostrils flared. 'That damned Menzies,' she hissed.

'Actually, it happened mostly under Labor,' said Emily. 'Under Chifley. Menzies only became PM in 1949.'

'But wasn't Chifley a big supporter of Zionism?' challenged Joanna. 'I don't understand.'

'Maybe his support for the establishment of a Jewish state was compensation for secret guilt?' Emily hypothesised. 'But who knows? What we do know is that the program was top secret because the Americans and

British didn't want the Soviets to know how many of Germany's best scientific and engineering minds they'd enlisted.'

'I also doubt the Australian public would accept an influx of Nazis in their midst,' mused Joanna. 'At least I hope they wouldn't.'

'True,' nodded Emily. 'I can't imagine this news would have been well received by the RSL just a few years after the war.'

'I guess not,' Joanna agreed. 'All those Rats of Tobruk and veterans of El Alamein would have taken a pretty dim view of resettling Nazis down under.'

'Of course, it all came out many years later,' said Emily. 'In the 1990s, press reports revealed that at least 127 German scientists and engineers were sent to Australia between 1946 and 1951.'

'So, Menzies was involved!' said Joanna, with a glint in her eye.

'He inherited the program from Labor,' replied Emily. 'Some of those Germans were given whole new identities. Others worked on missile research and weapon development, despite a blanket ban on Nazis entering the country. Many were employed at the Woomera rocket range and others at the Salisbury explosives factory, which was a support facility for Woomera.'

'I don't think I'll ever be voting Labor again,' said Joanna.

'I hear you,' said Emily. 'The Simon Wiesenthal Centre says that Australia became a haven for Holocaust perpetrators and demanded an investigation. The Australian Jewish community joined the calls for an official inquiry. They said it was a disgrace that fully paid-up Nazi party members, including those who belonged to SS killing units, were permitted to enter Australia and start new lives, often at taxpayers' expense.'

‘This is all so depressing,’ said Joanna in a soft voice. ‘But it’s good you’re teaching this to your students. What was that Santayana quote?’

“Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it”,’ smiled Emily. ‘But I’m happy we see the world through the same eyes.’

‘Yes, I think we have the same convictions, the same social conscience and commitment to what is right,’ replied Joanne, if that isn’t blowing my own trumpet too much. ‘That’s why I feel so comfortable when we’re together.’

Emily leant forward and kissed Joanna tenderly.

They smiled and took each other’s hand.

Emily lifted her glass, ‘To us,’ she said quietly with a smile.

They drank.

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