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Jeffrey and Ghislaine: Notes on New York's Oddest Alliance

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"I've got a story idea for you. The rebuilding of Indonesia. Or New Orleans. Or both. Go there. I've just been. You will never think the same way about anything again."

So spoke not Bill or Melinda Gates, but Ghislaine Maxwell, the 48-year-old woman being written up everywhere at the moment as the alleged "procurer" of young women for billionaire Jeffrey Epstein.

Epstein, 57, is the financier who spent a year in jail on charges of soliciting prostitutes—and now there is talk of another investigation because various women, now in their twenties and thirties, have come forward with allegations that he molested them when they were under-age. The allegations first surfaced in British newspapers, which have zeroed in on Epstein's friendship with Prince Andrew, who has recently tried to publicly disassociate himself from his old pal. I wrote a piece for *Vanity Fair* in 2003 called "The Talented Mr. Epstein." It was largely a business piece that focused on his mysterious exit from Bear Stearns in 1981, his close relationships with Jimmy Cayne, Les Wexner, the chairman of Limited Brands, and above all, the man who claimed to be his mentor, Steven Jude Hoffenberg, who is currently serving a 20-year-jail sentence for bilking investors in Towers Financial out of \$450 million.

The piece alluded to Epstein's great friendship with Maxwell, and how she introduced him to young women with whom he had sexual relationships. But, in the end, the story didn't really go there, focusing instead on the issue that remains a mystery—how Jeffrey made his money, and how Ghislaine made hers.

This is not to say I didn't hear stories about the girls. I did. But, not knowing quite who to believe, I concentrated on the intriguing financial mystery instead. But now the women have come back. Not the same ones, different ones. And their stories are bone-chilling. Journalists from England have phoned—and, in one case, flown—to ask me about Epstein and Maxwell. Who is he? And the British, especially, want to know: Who is she? At this point, I am so bored of repeating myself to others—it was, after all, my 2003 *Vanity Fair* story that really brought him into the limelight—that I have decided to write about this myself.

Bizarrely, perhaps, I have gotten to know Jeffrey and Ghislaine far better *after* my piece than before it. I kept running into both of them, separately, at parties. Jeffrey is not a social animal so he usually has a couple of young women with him who stand two feet behind him, as if serving a monarch. "Do they speak?" I remember asking him once, nodding at his lookalike blondes. He laughed. "Not like *you*, Vicky," was his riposte.

I remembered that when we'd once discussed math—in particular, an isosceles triangle—and I revealed I hadn't studied math since I was 14 (such is, or was, the way of the British educational system), I received a package at home via messenger. It was a book: "Math for idiots."

So he is not without humor, even though he doesn't drink or smoke, and hates restaurants.

"Jeffrey knows a good deal about most subjects," newspaper publisher Mort Zuckerman told me last week. He was certainly preaching to the converted. The truth is, Epstein *does* know a lot about a lot of things. Just a few moments in his company and you know this to be true.

When I saw pictures of Prince Andrew walking in Central Park with Jeffrey, my immediate thought was that "Andy"—as Jeffrey calls him—is probably asking for help with his role as British trade envoy, or whatever his strange title is. Because if one thing's for sure: When it comes to international business, Jeffrey knows what he's talking about far more than "Andy" does. Which is why Leon Black, Mort Zuckerman and a few other financiers hang out with him.

And Ghislaine?

Full disclosure: I like her. Most people in New York do. It's almost impossible not to.

She is always the most interesting, the most vivacious, the most unusual person in any room. I've spent hours talking to her about the third world at a bar until 2am. She is as passionate as she is knowledgeable. She is curious. She has spent weeks at the bottom of the ocean, literally going deeper than anyone else. She has sent me a DVD of the fish there. Her rolodex would blow away almost anyone else's I can think of—probably even Rupert Murdoch's. She is very well-read and can talk about most things for hours. She is passionate about Bill Clinton with whom she is close friends.

Yet, touchingly, when she had to give a speech at the 40th birthday party of her best friend, Ariadne Calvo-Platero, (known fondly to her close friends as "the Tennis Goddess") Ghislaine shook a little with nerves. When it comes down to things she really cares about—and Ariadne is one of them—Ghislaine shows her vulnerability.

And that vulnerability is key to understanding her friendship with Jeffrey.

"He saved her," I remember a close friend of mine telling me. "When her father died, she was a wreck; inconsolable. And then Jeffrey took her in. She's never forgotten that—and never will."

In many ways, the socially awkward Epstein with his big house, plane, island and ranch was the perfect replacement for her father, the late Robert Maxwell, newspaper tycoon and criminal. Sure, Jeffrey had his sexual peccadillos, but then Ghislaine's father was not without his oddities. After all, it was he who died leaving a massive "black hole" he'd fraudulently created. To Ghislaine, Jeffrey's habits may not have seemed that strange.

In fact, she probably figured, rather like I have, after years of writing about the very rich, that most successful people in the end either have some weird habit (the late Bruce Wasserstein had the weight issues, the girl issues, and moved countries to avoid paying tax), or they break the law (Sam Waksal, Martha Stewart.) You don't tend to get to the top by being the world's most balanced human being. Even the folksy Warren Buffett didn't quite manage a normal life—whatever that is. He had a second "wife" for many years whose existence he has been open about.

So what to make of the current fuss over Ghislaine? I haven't spoken to her or to Jeffrey, but I suspect that her loyalty to friends like Bill Clinton will keep her in good stead, in the end, she'll be out and about as always. Look at Waksal and Stewart. No one sees them and thinks: criminal. Au contraire. In this city, money makes up for all sorts of blemishes.

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