

## The Equation

She should have been thinking about Elspeth, but Jezebel's thoughts kept turning to Emmeline – and Maxie too, of course, but that was to be expected in either scenario. He was the common element in her ruminations. More than that, he was the pivot, the amphidromic point around which her roiling thoughts pitched and changed direction. So much depended on his emphasis.

She would recite the procedural caveats pertaining to Elspeth, and adhere to her tone of newfound respect. There were habits she could eradicate if she put her mind to it. So, while it was on the tip of her tongue to urge Elspeth to *be there to open any jars for Maxie if he has trouble*, she stowed the sarcasm and kept things positive. She was entrusting this man with her daughter after all. She had to assume he was capable, especially now when the hour of her departure was imminent. But then Maxie would let fly with the non-sequiturs, the irrelevant questions that cast doubt on his focus, and caused Jezebel to lose hers.

'So, how old is Emmeline?' That was one, maybe the first, but Jezebel found it hard to keep them all in sequence looking back. It had taken her a little while to note that there were a *lot* of questions about Emmeline. Okay, so some of them were just statements, recollections about when Emmy had first turned up at Enzo's gym, stuff like that, or about the time Maxie went around to her place and they'd discussed costume design. That one had *led* to a question, however, when Maxie wondered aloud how Emmeline could afford a place like that. But whatever form the digressions took, questions or casual observations, there had certainly been a few. Here they were, needing to ascertain that Elspeth would be safe and happy, and Maxie kept going on about Emmeline. Under the circumstances, it was only natural that Jezebel's mind too should wander.

So she could lay the blame at his feet again, drape herself in *that* old habit like donning a familiar garment, a cut-off set of trackie dacks maybe. Threadbare. See-through. Just as her customary moral refuge had been worn thin by time and over practice, leaving bare snatches of motivation to show through the tattered remnants of warp and weft. No, blame was nothing more than deflection, a comfort invariably obliterated by the inevitable frictions of introspection. But still, it irked her, her own digression.

It was the question about Emmeline's age that had snared her attention, regardless of ordinal position. Because Jezebel knew what was going through Maxie's mind. He was working the equation. He was meticulously casual in putting it out there, right down to 'oh', as if it were nothing more than a passing thought, but he was definitely working the equation.

Carol had gone on about it enough: half your age plus seven, the formula to establish the outliers of respectability when it came to age difference. Always presuming it was the older party's responsibility to set things above board. At what grouping of ages, wondered Jezebel, did scandal swing back the other way? At what stage did it become the Hollywood cliché of a nubile tramp or handsome gigolo ensnaring a feeble Senex or an ailing dowager? Scandal too was bound by the continuum mechanics of tides, refusing to settle as a pool of disgrace, from which one in the end might conceivably walk away. It flowed instead as a perpetual current, forever rebounding between points of blame. It came down to vulnerability, Jezebel supposed, and she could not help but be aware of Maxie's lifelong dearth of defences, an innate helplessness that age and experience had far from remedied.

She cringed as much at that, the sad ineptitude that flavoured the essence of his being, as she did at the pathetic notion that he might be, and probably was, pondering the equation. How Carol had moaned over the years, using those mathematics to underline the unassailable truth of her outrageous misfortune, the injustice of her position! Seven years plus half her husband's age left her short of the mark when they first dated – only for a handful of months, and by a measure of time even shorter than that, but it was sufficient to establish her perpetual state of having been wronged. It sat paramount among the careful selection of facts, anecdotes and data to which she so frequently found reason to have recourse, the pride of her collection.

So, how old *was* Emmeline? Older than Jezebel, but not by much. Thirty-one? Thirty-two maybe. And Maxie was fifty-four, so half his age plus seven equalled... thirty-four. No match,

Maxie. Close, but no cigar. But close enough, perhaps, for him to entertain the idea in spite of the outcome. And although neither was he old enough nor Emmeline young enough to evoke traditional archetypes of scandal, the question nevertheless reared its head: who might be preying upon whom?

Emmeline wasn't evil exactly, but she had a way of capitalising on her attributes. And she mightn't have tipped the beauty scales at supermodel-gorgeous; but from certain angles, if you were a man, or a woman of Emmeline's general persuasions maybe, she was probably in that ballpark. And she knew how to draw attention, just as she had the first time she'd encountered Maxie: the gymnastic flourishes, the odd striking pose, her orange hair. Her general manner, in fact. Face it, she was flirtatious, and not in a way that denoted an action or intent. For her, it was an ingrained part of her being – not that she had any qualms about reaping the unearned rewards. And in that context, Maxie's question about her flat was quite perspicacious.

Distracted by yet another thread, Jezebel noted the wording of her inner monologue. *Perspicacious*. She was more pretentious than she cared to admit sometimes. But not Carol-pretentious: the disturbing realisation was how similar she could be to Maxie.

*I'm nothing like my dad*, she reminded herself, for the first time finding a desperate affirmation within the mantra.

But yes, Maxie's question *was* perspicacious, or at least pertinent. Even Carol would probably be okay with 'pertinent'. How indeed *did* Emmeline afford a place like that? *Well, how do you think, Maxie?* The same way she scored three-hour cello lessons for a half-hour price; the circus girls had told Jezebel all about that, and not without a certain degree of cattiness, because they still mistakenly assumed a certain spicy tenor to Emmeline's and her relationship. But Jezebel knew the cello tuition arrangement would be just the tip of the iceberg. Emmeline was accustomed, probably; to baristas waving away her plastic and telling her it was on the house, the favours of strangers, let alone casual acquaintances. Well, guys anyway, because they were all stupid; the girls in Emmeline's life tended not to morph into dribbling morons when in her presence. And of course any guys who found out that she leaned predominantly in that direction became, if anything, more inflamed than ever. Seriously, what was wrong with men?

That wasn't to say Emmeline put out, no more than anyone else really, but in the flirtatiousness of her posture and smile, in her easy conversation and open charm, there dwelt an unspecified promise, just the faintest suggestion that, if the moment were propitious, she *might*. The boys seemed to sense all of that at a single glance.

Possibly she followed through. Well, definitely she would have at times, but in how many instances, Jezebel had no way of knowing. It would be a necessity on occasion, surely, and on some level Emmeline would have to be aware of the implied contract. Yes, there was an openness and familiarity about her that might, in euphemistic assessments, be described as 'spiritually free', but still she undeniably threw herself harder at some, at her cello teacher and her landlord for instance, than at others. And that wasn't to assume she'd screwed their brains out – God knows, there was probably more power to be had from holding things in reserve – but she had to understand what some of these dupes presumed, or at least hoped, was on the table. How could she not? Who would ever be so naïve?

Well, Maxie maybe. No, Maxie definitely. *Wake up and smell the pheromones, Maxie*. Fifty-four years old, with at least one girlfriend in his past as far as Jezebel could tell, *and* an ex-wife, and yet he was sadly oblivious to such tensions, even to flirting. He was still a babe in the woods when any hint of libido lurked in the social jungle. So, who *was* preying upon whom? Well, at their first encounter, Emmeline hadn't exactly summed him up as windswept and dangerous, had she? He had been 'the little dapper cutie'. An easy mark.

Maxie was unbelievably artless, innocent to the point where it was almost a vice. In the end, it was everyone's duty to grow up. So if Emmeline was messing with Maxie, he was at fault too, not specifically for his actions or inactions at this point in time, but for the extended childhood he'd maintained enroute.

Sensing the little boy within, or the little girl maybe, Emmeline could toy with Maxie like a cat with a lizard. But how hard was she trying? Maxie's psychic defences were, in all probability, just as weak as his physical ones. (Would it have killed him to pick up a barbell once in a while?) And considering his romantic leanings, plus the frequency with which women had run the other way over the years, it wouldn't have taken much attention from Emmeline for her presence to make its

mark. She was dealing with someone as impressionable as a child. Somewhere along the line, as short as that line was, she should have realised that.

There was no fool like an old fool; wasn't that the proverb? A moment's indulgence would delineate the folly of Maxie's starry-eyed aspirations. He was unlikely to act on his whimsy of course – he was far too timid for that – but it showed in his eyes and his muddleheaded distractions. Sooner or later, someone would notice.

Emmeline, for a start, if she hadn't already. And Jezebel couldn't dismiss the suspicion that she indeed understood the situation. On some unconscious level she had to be aware of the power she wielded, even if she hadn't tried as hard as usual, and still she wasn't backing off. Or if she was, poor old Maxie hadn't noticed.

So why would Emmeline take advantage? And in what way was it to her advantage? What did unconscious instinct tell her she would receive in return for a fluttering of eyelashes? She had insinuated her way into the band, of course; but there most likely wouldn't *be* a band if she hadn't, and despite her verbal enthusiasms, it didn't seem much of a drawcard. No, Maxie had nothing material to offer. And Jezebel doubted 'the little dapper cutie' had simply swept Emmeline off her feet. All that Maxie could provide was access. Access to Jezebel.

And now Emmeline's courtesies were making his heart go pitter-pat. But it was misdirection, flirtation by proxy. She had designs on Jezebel, and hurting Maxie would just be collateral damage. All was fair in love and war, and there was no fool like an old fool.

*Jealous much?* Jezebel tried to expunge the thought; but if she was jealous, that was only what Emmeline had intended. But jealous of whom? Did she resent a wedge driven between her and her father, now that there was a chance to repair years of alienation? Or was she jealous of Maxie, as he received attention and possibly admiration from someone who at one point could have been, and possibly still could be, her lover? Surely not. Jezebel held fast to the conviction that she didn't swing that way.

But just two nights ago, she'd had the dream, revisiting Enzo's gym and Emmeline's spontaneous floor routine; and in the dream, she had taken Emmeline by the arm, to chip her about attention seeking and tell her to settle down... and that's when it turned weird. Dream-Emmeline had stepped closer, and there had been fingertips caressing Jezebel's arms and the gentle touch of lips on lips. Even now, she could feel the tactile sensations. But at that point the dream had changed, the gym becoming a bedroom of unspecified location, while in the manner of dreams Emmeline too was transformed. Sometimes it was still she with whom Jezebel was breathless and entwined, but more and more it became Dorian, or Paulo, or a peculiar hybrid of Tynan and Enzo. Jezebel clung to that finale, and the preferences it implied, but couldn't shake the strange thrill of her encounter with Emmeline, even if it hadn't been real.

All of this now, her dream of two nights ago and the implications of Maxie's present meandering, still occupied part of her brain. But she kept it hidden behind the autopilot of her speech as she drilled Maxie with instructions and admonitions.

'That's what you need to remember,' she insisted, 'when you take Emmeline to pre-school...'  
'Elspeth,' objected Maxie. 'You mean Elspeth.'

Jezebel brushed her error aside. 'Yes, of course... Elspeth.'