

## (POWER)

Suspected of murdering that blond girl in Aruba? Having some problems with your appointment as homeland-security chief? Made the mistake of having sex with Christie Brinkley's husband? Call **Joe Tacopina**, the best-dressed, smoothest-talking, hardest-working criminal-defense attorney going, and for a mere \$750 an hour, **everything** will be okay by **Lisa DePaulo**

# \*1-800-SAVE-MY-ASS



TONIGHT, JOE TACOPINA—or as the TV makeup artists call him, “Joe-too-bad-he’s-married-Tacopina”—is wandering the beaches of Aruba in his favorite Italian soccer shirt, his \$6,500 Panerai watch (official timekeeping instrument of the Italian navy), and the leather sandals he bought in Milan, searching for Booty. It doesn’t look good. He’s here as part of his ongoing quest to clear “the good name” of Joran van der Sloot, one of his numerous infamous clients, the one who had the misfortune of being the last person to see (and sort of have sex with) Natalee Holloway.

But, ah, Joe is convinced—still!—that his client was not the last person to see Natalee alive. “Booty was,” he says. “And who knows who else?” Booty is an alleged drug dealer who operates out of a hut on the beach, just feet from the ground-floor room at the Holiday Inn where Natalee was staying...until she vanished. Gotta find Booty. >>>

Joran has not been charged with anything (despite spending ninety days in an Aruban jail), but more than a year after Natalee disappeared, Joe isn't taking any chances. He continues to investigate the crime as though the cable networks were still running nightly dispatches.

"Check this out," says Joe. We are standing toe-deep in sand on a pitch-black night, peering into Natalee's hotel room. The sliding doors lead directly to the beach—and to Booty's drug hut. Booty, Joe explains, told Joe's private investigator that he saw Natalee return to her room that night at three ten in the morning, *fifteen minutes after Joran left her on the beach*. "Booty knew it was Natalee, because he *knew* her," Joe says. "Because he sold her drugs earlier that day."

Wow. Now, that would be a news flash. Is he sure about this?

"Well, it would be kinda nice if I can get Booty to tell me the same thing," Joe says.

"Hey! You're that guy!"

Someone has recognized Joe on the beach. This happens all the time in Aruba. Actually, it doesn't matter where you go: These days, *everyone* seems to know Joe. They know him from his daily appearances in the tabloids, for representing...well, just about everyone. Joran van der Sloot; Bernie Kerik; Michael Jackson's manager; Foxy Brown (until they parted ways—"She's either gonna end up in jail or an insane asylum"); the "Page Six" guy accused of trying to shake down Ron Burkle; the *Sopranos* actor caught up in a cop killing; the woman who was hurt when Yankees pitcher Cory Lidle crashed his plane into her apartment; the nurse from New Jersey whose husband washed up in three suitcases in the Chesapeake Bay; and on and on. They've seen his constant appearances on the Greta-Larry-Abrams-Crier dead-girl-of-the-week cable-TV circuit. (But not *Nancy Grace*. He refuses to do *Nancy Grace*.) They've heard him on *Imus in the Morning* (he also occasionally "counsels Imus on legal matters"). Even his appearances as a legal expert for ABC News—a gig he discontinued because it precluded him from being on *every* channel. "It would have been to the detriment of my clients if I could only go on ABC," he says. But he still owes the network big-time. It was an ABC producer, after all, who told Joran van der Sloot to "call Joe Tacopina" after his previous lawyers pissed him off.

So part of the agenda in Aruba this week is to toss a bone to ABC's Chris Cuomo in the form of an "exclusive" sit-down with Joran.

ABC did the first half of the interview yesterday, on the beach where Joran *did not do it*. "They wanted to do the interview near the fishermen's huts," Joe explains, "but we eschewed that. We don't want to make it any more sensational than it already is." (Joe thinks of everything.) Instead, they had Joran walk the beach where *he did not do it* at sunset, when the lighting would be nice. Other than that, "no ground rules," Joe says. Well, except that Cuomo wasn't allowed to ask about what happened that night! "We *did* that already," says Joe—in Cuomo's last exclusive with Joran and Greta's last exclusive with Joran...

That morning, over breakfast at the Hyatt, young Joran van der Sloot—who is so tall (six feet four) his head keeps hitting the lid over the omelet bar while the waitresses gawk and the other breakfast diners point—tells me that he hasn't had to worry about much since Joe Tac has been in charge. "I love the guy," he says. So much that "if I do get any money from any of these civil suits, I plan to give it all to Joe."

You mean more than his 30 percent?

"Every dime."

("He *said* that?" says Joe. "That's really touching." *Ka-ching!*)

Shortly after breakfast, Chris Cuomo—soon to be knighted as the news anchor of *Good Morning America*—is cooling his heels in the Hyatt lobby. His camera crew has to catch the next flight out of Aruba, and Cuomo is none too pleased that Tacopina is holding up the big interview because he's upstairs changing into a new soccer shirt.

"Relax," Joe tells Cuomo from his cell phone.

"He's on Tacopina time," Joran explains to Cuomo, referring to the phrase often used for Joe's chronic lateness.

Of course, it will all work out in the end. Joran will do the final interview poolside at his parents' house. Cuomo will get his "exclusive"—and his *GMA* gig. And Joe Tacopina will have another notch in his belt as the hottest lawyer in the country.



EVERY FEW YEARS, we get one of these guys. You know, the lawyer who lands all the juicy cases, who wears bespoke suits and drives fancy cars, who seems to have a television earpiece permanently implanted



★ Tacopina first made news by winning an acquittal for Thomas Wiese (left) in the Abner Louima police-brutality case in 1999.

on the left side of his head, who makes more appearances in the *New York Post* than in court, and who eventually...crashes and burns.

But Joe is different. For one thing, he wins. This isn't another Mark Geragos, the last lawyer-of-the-minute, who took his arrogance show on the road while his client Scott Peterson went to San Quentin. (Guess who got a call midway through the trial, asking if he was interested in taking over the case? Joe wasn't.) The TV anchors who book Joe will tell you that he is the It Guy because he's perfect for our made-for-cable world. MSNBC general manager Dan Abrams: "Joe oozes charm. When a lot of people picture what they want in a lawyer, they picture a guy who looks and acts like Joe. They want a big, tough, good-looking attorney who's gonna be *fearless* in advocating their cause. And Joe is just that." Court TV's Catherine Crier: "Look, he's charming and personable and has a good reputation and all that. But he's hot because he *produces*. He actually does excellent work in the courtroom, too. And Joe's *very* cute..." Fox's Greta Van Susteren: "Lawyering has changed a *lot*. It used to just be what you did in the courtroom. In the new age, which began really with William Kennedy Smith, you have to worry about the court of public opinion as well. Especially when you have a high-profile client. Joe is what I'd want from my lawyer if I were in trouble."

Not surprisingly, even Hollywood is taking notice. Joe has several studios courting him to do a reality show on daytime TV. "Sort of a *Judge Judy* meets *Perry Mason*"—yes, he has the lingo down—"but all cross-examinations," his specialty. He wasn't all that interested until he heard Judge Judy made \$32 million last year. "Can you fucking believe that? Judge Judy!" He shot a pilot in December.

But here's the thing about Joe—and it's what separates him from the other hot dogs. You can't help rooting for the guy. He somehow manages to be slick without being

Today he refuses to take Mob clients: "I gave up a couple million in fees last year, turning this stuff down. I won't do it anymore. They made it hard for people like my father, who is the purest soul on earth."

slippery, the first “TV lawyer” who can slice and dice and pontificate on the biggest cases in the headlines—many of them his—and still come off like a regular Joe. (“The faint New York accent helps,” says Abrams.)

It’s something that drives his competitors crazy. Talk to other criminal-defense attorneys and they’ll tell you two things: On the record, Great guy, works his ass off. Off the record, How did *this* sonofabitch get to be the Guy?

Does Tac ever wonder: Why me?

“Yeah!” A pause. “I mean, yes and no. I know a large part is due to luck. I caught some good breaks. I mean, look, I know tomorrow it could all be over. *Believe me*, I wake up and go, ‘Today’s the day they’re gonna catch on.’ But on the other hand, I worked my fingers to the bone. I work around the clock, and I *care*. I know I have the skills; I’m not bashful about that. But I don’t believe in my own bullshit, either. I don’t drink my own Kool-Aid. I don’t think because I’m on TV or have these cases that I’m some self-important individual. As a matter of fact, I hate...like, this stuff?”—he points to the tape recorder—“I get *embarrassed* by this stuff.” Well, not too much. But still.



**BACK ON** the beach in Aruba, the Booty call is not going as planned. Joe can’t find the guy. And neither can his two sidekicks, with whom he spends most of his professional time: his young associate (soon to be made partner) Chad Seigel, whom he once tried to strangle in a cab in Houston (long story), and Rosemarie Arnold, his Guccied-out partner in his new *civil* practice, which is different from his criminal practice (and different from his practice in Milan—yes, he has a law firm there, too).

“I don’t think we’re gonna find Booty,” says Rosemarie.

“Have some faith!” says Joe.

We’ve been walking the beach for over an hour now, skirting between tiki torches, hotel beach bars, and clusters of slurring tourists. It’s amazing that Natalee and Joran ever found a private place to have sex out here. “Well, they didn’t actually *do* it,” Joe explains, “because Joran didn’t have a condom. But they did everything but.”

Joe’s very fancy cell phone is ringing.

“Cuomo,” he reports. “His flight was delayed for four hours, and he’s stuck at the frickin’ Aruba airport.” He smiles. “Guess we had *plenty* of time for the interview.”

Nice cell phone.

“Bernie Kerik gave me this. It costs, like, 5,000 bucks.”

As we walk, more calls come in. Clients who need to talk to Joe, would-be clients who want to hire Joe. In the weeks to come, there will be plenty more boldfaced names in Joe’s roster. Rick Hilton—Paris’s father—needs help with one of his other kids, who was

## Joe knows cops, likes cops. He’s defended a lot of them. He made his name by defending one of the cops in the notorious Abner Louima case. But he’s not afraid of breaking their balls, if necessary.

involved in a scuffle in Central Park. Rachael Ray’s husband wants to hire Joe to do “media relations,” because the *National Enquirer* is reporting that he had an affair and wanted the woman to spit on him. (“People *do* that?” says Joe.) Even John Mark Karr, the creepy suspect in the JonBenet case, reaches out via his dad. (“You gotta be *kidding*,” says Joe.)

But, oh, dear God. Here, on the beaches of Aruba, a true tragedy has occurred.

While Joe is searching for Booty, he somehow loses his Bernie Kerik cell phone. But he does not realize this until we are ensconced, an hour later, in his favorite Italian restaurant in Aruba.

He dispatches Chad to go scour the beach, dig in the sand, whatever it takes.

Whatever it takes? If they couldn’t find Natalee Holloway, how will they ever find the Bernie Kerik cell phone?

“Just bring me the cell phone,” says Joe. “We’ll keep your ravioli warm.”

Chad returns an hour later with the cell phone. “The fuck, man,” says Joe. “There’s sand in it!”



**HE GREW UP** in a row house in Sheepshead Bay, Brooklyn. His mother, Josephine, worked for the New York City Fire Department, in accounting. His father, Cosmo, sold cardboard boxes. They still live in the house he grew up in, with the clothesline out back and the washer-dryer in the kitchen (with pictures of Joe taped all over it) and Joe’s bronzed baby shoes in the china cabinet. Joe tried to buy them a McMansion near his place in Connecticut, but they weren’t interested. “What’s wrong with our house?” his father asks.

Joe’s parents are in their eighties. They hold hands on the pleather couch and put out salami and cheese. They don’t think they did “anything special” for their only son. But it was Josephine who dragged him to the rink out at Coney Island when she thought he needed a hobby. (He ended up being scouted by the New York Islanders but went to law school instead.) And it was Josephine who once, during a game, walked on the ice in her heels and pulled a kid off Joe, by his hair. “It was a little traumatic,” says Joe. “I was hoping the kid killed me and this wasn’t happening.”

“Joseph, he was *hurting* you,” says his mother. To me: “He cried all the way home.”

“Ma!” says Joe.

They worked extra jobs to send him to Poly Prep so that he didn’t have to go to

public school. They helped him pay for college at Skidmore, where he landed a partial hockey scholarship. “I remember driving up there in an old Cutlass Supreme, an ugly big-ass car, and parking next to all the BMWs. I called my dad the first night and said, ‘I don’t know if this is the place for me. I’m a little different than everyone else here.’ He said, ‘Do us a favor, just stick it out.’”

In college he chased tail, was captain of the hockey and baseball teams, and read *Fatal Vision* by Joe McGinniss. The book so affected him, he decided to be a criminal-defense attorney.

His first big break came courtesy of his mother. One of her friends at work said a relative of hers had a great job transcribing tapes for some lawyer. Josephine intervened so her son would have a summer job, and Joe ended up transcribing tapes for the Paul Castellano trial. He met all the tough guys. One thing led to another, and by the time Joe was actually in law school, he was working on the first big Gotti trial. “I realized I instigated this,” says his mother, “but I had to keep telling him, ‘These are not good people.’” His father was both proud and mortified. Today, as he sits on the couch, he looks away when Josephine whispers the word *Mafia*. “He hates them,” Joe says later. His father, an immigrant, can still remember how his family’s deli would be shaken down by the Mob. “Otherwise the windows would get broken,” says Joe. “It was brutal.”

Today he refuses to take Mob clients. Of course, he has the luxury of not needing the money. “I probably gave up a couple million in fees just last year, turning this stuff down. But I just won’t do it anymore. They made it hard for everyone, for people like my father, who is the purest soul on earth. Whenever I start thinking I’m, like, flying a little too high, I think back to him and say, You know what? That’s a good person. If you complete your life like that, you’ve accomplished a lot.”

Josephine and Cosmo watched their son make it to the Brooklyn D.A.’s office fresh out of law school. (They proudly show off his A.D.A. evaluation from 1994. Sample quote: “He leaps from his chair, resembling a bull in a china cabinet.”) Even then, they helped out in their own way. At the time, Joe was already married, with his first kid, and money was tight. So Josephine went to the local deli and made a deal with the owners: If they would give Joe lunch every day, she would come in at the end of the



week and pay the bill. “I had no idea,” says Joe. “I thought they were giving me free sandwiches because they liked me.”

“Everyone liked you,” says his mother. “Even the priest.” She turns to me. “Joseph was even the best altar boy.”

“Grain of salt on that,” says Joe. “I was *not* the best altar boy.”

“I think the priest favored you, Joseph,” says Josephine.

“Stop it, Ma!”



A DECADE AGO, Joe Tacopina was so not-hot that he spent every Friday and Saturday night as the coat-check guy at the Longshore Club in Westport, Connecticut (where he now owns a six-bedroom lake-front home with an ice rink in the basement), working for tips. “I needed the money for diapers and shit,” he explains. (He has a wife and *five kids* at home—and he’s only 40.) He had just left the Brooklyn D.A.’s office and was trying to build his own practice, so he’d lug his law files to the coatroom and try to do work, between customers. “They’d take their jackets off and throw them at me,” he says. “The furs, stuff like that. ‘Son, don’t put that on a wire hanger!’ It was so condescending, so demeaning. I was a lawyer, I was a former prosecutor, I’d prosecuted some of the most vicious murders in New York City, and they’d be like, ‘Here’s \$2 for you, sonny.’ I wanted to say, ‘Fuck you!’”

He couldn’t afford an office, so he improvised. “I got one of those packages, you know? Where you get your mail, you get an address, you get someone to *try* and answer your phones, although it became pretty obvious that it wasn’t my office, because they could never pronounce my name: ‘No, Mr. *Tropotina* is not here right now.’” The package also came with a conference room for ten hours a month at 575 Madison Avenue. “It was a Madison Avenue address! I had business cards made and shit, and I’d get my mail there.”

At the same time, he set up a “virtual office,” operating out of diners on Madison Avenue, making calls, meeting clients. The waitresses took pity on him—to a point. “Basically, the gig was I’d try and find a corner where I’d stay out of everyone’s way, and order a coffee and a bagel, and try and milk two hours. But eventually they’d be like, ‘*Sir*, do you need anything else?’ And then they’d put the check on the table. So I’d move to the next diner.”



THREE DAYS before jetting off to Aruba, Joe is headed to a much bleaker place: Queens. More specifically, to the Queens criminal courthouse—“You’re about to see the belly of the beast,” he says—a place he doesn’t get to very often nowadays, being the lawyer to the stars and all.

“What, no E-ZPass?” he says as he heads through the Midtown Tunnel, driving a sleek new black Lexus and fumbling around to find the E-ZPass thingie.

He doesn’t *know* if he has an E-ZPass?

“Oh, this isn’t my car.” It’s his intern’s. (You know things are good when your intern drives a Lexus.) Joe wanted to take the Maserati or the Audi A8 but had to borrow the intern’s car because he slept on “the boat” last night. (That would be the forty-nine-foot Meridian yacht on which he occasionally cruises into Chelsea Piers from his home dock in Westport.)

“I got the greatest case last night,” says Joe, handing money to the toll clerk at the tunnel. “Did you read about that woman who was in the papers yesterday? She hired me last night.” Pause for effect. “A 34-year-old woman taking the PATH train home from the city. Office party. She takes the train home, gets off, is drunk. Goes to her car. Two Jersey transit cops basically convince her to follow them. She says, ‘No, I’m just gonna sleep it off in the car.’ They go, ‘No, no, we’ll escort you home, don’t worry about it, follow me.’ She follows the cop car. They make her get into a car *drunk*, first of all...” He is building the case in his head. “Then they say, ‘Follow us.’ And they make a left, and they turn into a lot, and they *rape* her. Two cops. This is a great case.”



He just missed an exit. It’s been a while since he was in Queens.

“So she called me. And she’s scared. She’s got a husband and three kids. This is the kind of case, I just want to get in front of a jury *and slaughter these fucking guys*.”

Joe knows cops, likes cops. He’s defended a lot of them. The case that put him on the map, in the late ’90s, was when he was a defense lawyer in the notorious Abner Louima case. He eventually got his guy—Tom Wiese, a cop who actually *admitted* being in the men’s room at the time—acquitted on all counts. No one expected it, least of all Joe. And so the cops love him. But he’s not afraid of breaking their balls, if necessary.

“In this case, I could see them start attacking her. They’re gonna say it was consensual and whatnot,” he says. (They have pleaded not guilty.) “But first of all, even if it *was* consensual, it was a *crime*.... Did I just miss another exit?... The first thing I need to do is make sure these guys, because they’re cops, don’t get a break. Believe me, if they try to shitcan this case, I will make some noise.”

His Bernie Kerik cell phone rings. It’s Bernie Kerik, calling from Amman. That would be *the* Bernie Kerik, the former N.Y.C. police commissioner who was *almost* the secretary of homeland security until his nomination imploded over...oh, gosh, where do we begin? Was it the nanny thing, the taking-free-shit thing, the Ground Zero fuck-pad thing, the affair-with-Judith Regan thing? In any event, even before Kerik had “a few problems,” as Joe puts it, Joe was his lawyer. Joe was the guy who talked to the White House to “vet” Bernie’s appointment. Joe was the guy Kerik planned to take with him to Washington to be his personal counsel. And Joe was the guy who got Bernie a sweet deal when the shit hit the fan: Kerik faced up to sixty years in bribery charges but ended up with two “unclassified misdemeanors”—a slap on the wrist. Bernie loves Joe so much that he gave him his Medal of Valor from his years as police commissioner. It’s on Joe’s shelf in his office, next to a silver-framed picture of the pope and a signed come-hither photo from Victoria Gotti, another esteemed client. Bernie loves Joe so much that he goes crazy finding gifts to send him. The Vuitton briefcase? “Bernie gave me that.” The Italian-navy watch? Bernie. “No one has ever appreciated me as much as Bernie has,” says Joe.

So anyway, he tells me, while he was landing this new client last night, he was also having cocktails with an editor from the *New York Post*. Client relations, you know.

“We had a little bump last week with Bianchi,” he says. That would be Diana Bianchi, the 19-year-old who slept with Christie Brinkley’s husband, Peter Cook.

✱ With Foxy Brown, *top*, in 2005; after lunch at Nello with Bernie Kerik. (“I love Joe like a brother,” says Kerik.)

## (POWER)

★ At home in Westport, Tacopina (a die-hard fan of the Azzurri, the Italian national team) plays soccer with the family dog, Cyrus.

The girl's stepfather, a cop, called Joe when a couple of dozen paparazzi showed up on their lawn and Diana was on the cover of every tabloid. Joe's first job was to try to restore her reputation. Then he took the gloves off: "Peter Cook first approached her when she was 17, okay? She's ringing up toys at a toy store.

For his kids. And he makes it as if he saw a star there. You know, bringing out the toys. 'Wow, you bring out those Legos quite well.'" He snorts. "Then he hires her to come work for him, and within a month of her being there, he starts making advances.... She's 18, he's 47. And she's his *employee*. What's she supposed to say, 'Get away from me, you old man?'"

The phone is ringing again. Now it's Jared Paul Stern, the ex-"Page Six" scribe who got caught allegedly extorting the billionaire Ron Burkle on tape. When Stern got busted, he called Joe, even though the last time they dealt with each other, Joe had called him "to have a yelling match" about a snarky item he'd written about yet another of Joe's clients. "I found him to be, uh, slightly arrogant. I wasn't a huge fan." But you took the case? "He called me and said, 'More than one person'—he plays this mystery thing—'told me you're the guy I have to see, that you're the fixer.' It was intriguing. It was 'Page Six.'" Plus, says Joe, "Burkle is perhaps the worst victim in the world! As a defense lawyer, you couldn't ask for a better guy to cross-examine. I mean, I'm sorry, I just don't see a jury having much sympathy for a schizophrenic paranoid billionaire who's so concerned about his coverage in the gossip pages that he has to go out of his way to do a \$200,000 sting operation to set up some schmuck from 'Page Six!'" (The feds have since decided that there is no case against Stern and never filed charges.)

Joe pulls up to the dreary Queens courthouse and finds a parking spot on the street.

By the way, what exactly are we doing here today?

"Oh," says Joe, "this is just client relations, really. It's just a regular case. It's gonna be adjourned. Nothing's gonna happen today."

But what's the case?

"My guy was a Mitsubishi Businessman of the Year, got some diploma and the whole write-up. But then he got busted in his house with cocaine and marijuana." (Even Joe's alleged drug dealers have credentials.) Anyway, Joe's here to get the case "knocked over for a month."

He waltzes into the courthouse. The



guy at the metal detectors give him high fives. A few lawyers in the hallway congratulate him on his new cases. He asks for some private time to go talk to the family of his client; five of them are here to show their support.

Where's his client?

"Oh," says Joe, "he's a guest of the governor today." He smiles. "He's a guest of the state correctional system."

Joe will spend the next few hours in a shit-hole of a courtroom, waiting for his client to arrive by bus from Riker's as a parade of D-list drug dealers get their moment before the weary judge. He sits there, Black-Berrying his children, nodding to his colleagues. "Look at that," he says, pointing to a lawyer who is dressed without a tie for court. "That is a disgrace."

Even here?

"It's a matter of respect," says Joe.



A FEW WORDS about the Italian thing.

Tacopina is so proud to be Italian—and by that we mean Real Italian; he has no use for the sauseege/ball-scratching *Sopranos* stuff ("it's embarrassing, it's like Ebonics for Italians; I hate *The Sopranos*")—that he has the Roman eagle tattooed on his right hip. "You want to see it?" he asks, the first time I show up to interview him in his office. (It's awesome.) His underwear is also Italian. (He buys the Dolce & Gabbana Italian-flag waistband motif: "How could I *not* have that?") He buys all his shoes in Italy, where he also has an office and a practice with seven lawyers. (His clients range from one of the Parmalat guys—"It's like Enron times twenty over there"—to Gina Lollobrigida—"She's still a babe.") He gets all his suits there, too, unless he finds a fabric he loves, in which case he brings it back to his guy at Loro Piana on Madison Avenue and has him handcraft one.

His office is decorated with Julius Caesar crapola, some of which he displays more prominently when he is on trial. "Caesar was the greatest strategist of all time," says Joe. One of his most prized possessions is a framed photograph of himself in Rome with Antonin Scalia. They were both honored by

the Italian-American Bar Association.

What were you doing in Rome with him?

"Getting drunk. This is me and him, hanging out at the Pantheon together."

He even has his bottled water shipped over from Italy. "You need it to make real espresso," he says.



HERE'S HOW HE MET HIS WIFE: He was in the law-school cafeteria when he saw her stacking trays (she worked for Marriott). He was 22, she was 23. "See that girl?" he told a friend. "I'm gonna marry her."

He made his move. Would she go on a date with him? No. Could they talk? No. Would she marry him? Um, no. She told him she was engaged. He persisted. "Just give me *one hour*," he begged. "*One hour*."

"I was actually thinking of calling security," says Tish.

Finally, she broke down and gave him his hour. He took her to a bar in Westport, and they had nachos. "When the hour was up," says Tish, "he said, 'Well, I'm completely in love with you, and I want to spend the rest of my life with you. How do *you* feel?'" Silence. "Well, let me know," he said. "Because if you love me, you can call off the other thing and we can get married, like, soon."

He negotiated another date. They went to a diner. He walked her to her car and gave her a peck on the cheek.

"That's all I get?" she asked. He was in.

The next day, he almost blew it, however, when he broke into her car with a wire hanger to leave a rose and a letter (in Italian) on her seat. She wasn't amused. Her large Irish family was even less amused. "They were like, 'Wait a minute, an Italian from Brooklyn who's breaking into your car?'" But Joe won them over.

A few days after meeting Ma and Pa Tacopina, I drive out to Westport to meet Tish and the kids. The house is grand but not fancy. They still haven't gotten around to putting furniture in the dining room, because they don't do dinner parties. The art consists of photos of the Italian soccer team and drawings by the kids. The most obnoxious part is Joe's shoe closet, which is larger than Tish's entire clothes closet.

Tish is, as Joe billed her, beautiful and real. The only flash is the huge diamond on her left hand—a surprise from her husband on their fifteenth wedding anniversary (Bernie sent him to "his guy" in the diamond district). He looks at her like she's an ice cream cone. We sit at the kitchen table and talk about what it's like to be Mrs. Joe-too-bad-his-married-Tacopina.

Her husband is the kind of guy, she says, who calls her fifteen times a day and tells her *every* day how lucky he is. She tells me the only thing she worries about with Joe is his schedule: She worries that he will get sick; she worries when he's driving home at two in the morning ("I stay up and talk

to him on the phone until he gets home”).

But it can't be easy. Women throw themselves at “celebrity lawyers” far less handsome than Joe. Earlier, I had asked Joe about this. “Yeah, plenty of times it's hard for her. But you know what? The more in the news I am, the more—I don't want to say reclusive—the more removed I am from these situations. My friend manages a restaurant on the Upper East Side, Campagnola. I used to go there all the time. I haven't been there in two years. Because it's just trouble. The women there, they line up at the bar. And I don't need that shit, you know?”

“Never ever will anybody be able to tell you that they see me out and about with women. I just don't do it. You know what's the saddest thing for me in the world? When I go to Nello or one of those restaurants with Bernie for lunch. And you see, like, guys who are old and decrepit come in with a stunner who's 25, and they're smiling, holding hands. I just say to myself, ‘I would rather be hit by a fucking bus than be, at that age in life, having that.’”

“So I wear my ring all the time. I make it very clear that I'm married, and happily married. Cindy Crawford could come and beg me, but I have more important things to do.” Like coach three soccer teams.

Joe and Tish have a rule: No matter what new desperate client he gets, the weekends are family time. “If someone from the White House called me on a Saturday and said, ‘President Bush just got arrested in Times Square and wants you to represent him,’ I'd send it to Chad,” Joe says.

Well, maybe not. But still.

At the end of the afternoon, Tish and Joe invite me to join them for dinner at Tarantino, an Italian joint in Westport. The five kids all pile into the Denali. The Maserati is not in the program. “Get in the car, honey,” says his wife. Tish drives.



**THE MORNING** Joe leaves Aruba, he is terribly hungover. He still hasn't found Booty, but he has a flight to catch and more hysterical clients to tend to. His cohorts, Chad and Rosemarie, stumble down to the lobby. “No more piña coladas for you,” says Joe.

At the airport, the customs guy swoons over Joe's cell phone. In the business-class lounge, he sits and fields a zillion calls, and he keeps talking on his way to the plane. CBS and MSNBC want him on the air. A client who's suing her ex for giving her herpes wants to talk. Bernie just wants to say hi and how was Aruba? Tish wants to know if he will get home in time for dinner.

Joe turns the phone off and reclines in his seat, snoring loudly until he gets back to New York.

Where there are sixty-three new messages waiting for him. ☒

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