

**F**irst of all, he's a Joe.

Dad warned me about this. A different kind of dad might have said, upon first meeting his daughter's fiancé, something along the lines of, "Seems like a nice enough fellow." Or, "What does he do for work?" My dad chatted with us for a few moments that April morning in 1987 when we drove all the way up to the Cape to give him the happy news, then he pulled me aside to offer an urgent, intervention-minded critique. "He's a Joe if I ever saw one," he grumbled, squinting off at some indiscernible point down his dead-end, crushed-shell road. You could tell it pained him to have to say it. He stroked his thick nose with the crook of his finger in an effort to conceal his words.

"He's a real Joe," he emphasized again, wincing slightly, and just like most Neds are thoughtful and Jakes tend to be sly, Davids smart and Jacks funny, Joes, according to Dad, are a handful.

He's a Joe and he's a Leo, he's part Italian and, if that weren't enough, he's starring in a television show. A Joe with his own show is a lethal combination. I see that now, of course, but back then, when I was still in the blinking, gushing, smitten stage of our relationship, I wasn't alarmed or annoyed by Dad's dire admonition, his superstitious "nameology," as my brother Neil used to call it. I was thrilled. *He's a Joe!* I told myself. *I've got myself a real Joe!* And he didn't have a show then, and nobody but Dad gave a shit what his name was, and truth be told, I didn't find him much of a handful at all until many years later, when he was almost out of my grasp.

Now Dad has more or less lost touch with reality. He lives at the VA hospital in Bedford, Mass. He's got Alzheimer's with a little wet brain thrown in. But even though he usually forgets who the kids and I are, he always remembers Joe.

"Joe Ferraro," he says when he catches a glimpse of him on the TV at the VA home, where he's known to his nurses not as Ralph Manning, but as Joseph Ferraro's father-in-law.

"A real Joe, the son of a bitch," my father says. And he knows one when he sees one.

[ one ]

Joseph Ferraro.”

The two words rose above the restaurant din from one of the tables behind me, rose up and out of the dull white drone of late-night chatter and the chink of fork upon china and the distant half-drowned tracks of a forgotten Hindi-jazz CD. Had they been any other two words, they might have become part of the ambient clamor that surrounds each table at Pastis like a protective garment, allowing its occupants to speak of love or desire or deals or just to leisurely gossip, as Karen Metzger and I had been doing for the past five minutes. It was Wednesday night at Pastis, we were celebrating Joe’s Golden Globe nomination with the Metzgers, and the guys had gone outside for a smoke.

“This is amazing, Julia, you have to try it,” Karen said. She was hacking away at a mound of hard hazelnut ice cream. “Here. Try it,” she said, tapping the plate with the tip of her spoon. Then she carved out one more little bite for herself.

“I just saw him, he’s standing outside smoking. Right outside the door.” It was the same man’s voice behind me, eager and disbelieving.

“I know. We saw that guy, but we don’t think it’s him. He looks too small.” This was a girl. A tipsy girl. And young, that was clear. She divided the word *small* into two syllables and then dropped the second syllable an octave, just the way my daughter, Ruby, and her friends did when they spoke to one another.

“Everybody looks smaller in real life,” said the guy. “Ever seen Tom Cruise? Guy’s a dwarf. Ever seen Al Pacino, Sean Penn? Pygmies!”

I shot Karen a look of startled amusement but she hadn’t heard him. She was shaving tawny ice-cream crescents onto her spoon and reexamining, in a tone that was rising with shrill indignation, the “perfect storm” that had swept her husband Brian’s just-released film to the bottom of the box-office charts, where it clung, battered by reviewers, looking for a dignified and timely route to next season’s DVD releases.

“The studio was out to lunch on this one,” Karen said. “And Sophie Wilkes just can’t act. A director can only do so much.”

“I don’t know, I think she’s all right,” I said. “Everybody liked her in that movie about the teacher. Didn’t she win the Oscar?”

“That was a fluke. She’s awful. Why aren’t you eating this?” Karen pushed the ice-cream plate to my side of the table and then she stared at it, wistfully.

“Go ahead,” I said. “I like it when it’s a little melted.” I slid the plate back to her. “Can I use your phone?” My phone was in my purse, dead.

Karen took one last swipe at the ice cream and then she plunged her arm up to her elbow into the oversized Balenciaga tote that hung from the back of her chair. She probed the depths of that two-thousand-dollar handbag, biting her lip and staring straight ahead, and I was reminded of a young English veterinarian I had recently seen on a television show, struggling to extract an unborn calf from the womb of its desperate mother.

“I can use Joe’s phone when he comes back,” I offered.

Karen frowned for a moment, thrusting her arm slightly deeper, and I could see the bulge of her knuckles as they rolled along the supple leather walls of the bag. There was the muffled tumbling of keys and coins and then she extracted the phone triumphantly.

“And I told Brian not to cast Gregory Mason. He’s just too gay. Nobody believes him when he plays a romantic lead.” Karen held the phone at arm’s length and squinted at the screen. Then she handed it to me.

“Greg Mason’s gay?”

“Julia . . . yes. Everybody knows this.”

“Wait. I know somebody who dated him. A girl.”

“Nonetheless. Giant fag.”

“No . . .” I said, laughing helplessly, but Karen interrupted me. “When they were shooting the scenes in Thailand, Greg had a parade of local working boys wandering in and out of his trailer every day. Ask Brian!” she said when I gave her a look. “And listen to this. We invited him out to Southampton one weekend and he brought tasteful gifts for me, the kids . . . even the dog.” Karen was whispering now because Joe and Brian were heading back to the table.

“What straight man is *that* thoughtful?” she murmured as I began to punch out my phone number.

“Well, I hear Tim Robbins is thoughtful. . . .”

“Julia . . . Gregory Mason brought an Hermès collar for Waffles.”

My thumb gleefully hit the last four numbers. An Hermès collar for poor old Waffles! The Nextel recording prompted me to enter my security code, and as I tapped it in, I watched Brian and Joe make their way through the crowded room. I recall, now, that Joe wore his “Yes, it’s me” expression—a shy half-smile, his gaze fixed just above the nudges and hungry glances that carried him along like a gentle wave. From behind me the man said, “I toldja! Joe Ferraro,” and then Joe Ferraro himself, grinning broadly now, slid into the chair beside me.

“Jesus Christ, we could hear you girls cackling all the way outside.”

“I love it,” said Karen. “We *were* cackling, Julia, like a pair of witches.”

“A pair of well-toned witches,” said Brian.

“I prefer sorceress,” I said, kissing Joe on the lips. “Somehow it sounds so much more attractive than witch.”

“They both sound evil. And sexy,” said Joe. “Who are you calling?”

“My voice mail. I just want to see if Ruby or Catalina called. . . .” I stopped talking then because the first message was playing.

“*Hi, babe,*” said a woman’s voice.

Who? The voice was Southern, I knew that at once. Just from those two words I knew.

“*Thanks for the message. I can’t believe you had to ask if I’m happy, baby, you know I am. Where are you, Joey?*”

Who?

I leaned away from Joe and he raised an eyebrow. “Everything all right?”

I nodded slowly, listening.

“*I want to see you, babe.*”

“Is it Catalina?” Joe asked, and I nodded again, still listening.

Joe turned to Karen and Brian. “You know, the first night Catalina babysat for us we thought she stole Ruby?”

“*I’m horny as a motherfucker,*” said my mysterious confessor.

My face burned. I felt waves of what must have been blood and adrenaline surging across my chest, shooting upward and then pounding against the top of my head. I was vaguely aware that Joe had launched into his “how we thought Catalina stole Ruby” anecdote. It’s one of his favorites.

“We never left Ruby with a sitter before that night because we were completely broke,” Joe began, and he shot me a little smile as he always did when recalling something from the days when we couldn’t eat at places like this, couldn’t afford cell phones or babysitters, couldn’t really even afford a baby—though we had gone ahead and had one, anyway.

“. . . and Julia was out of her mind with anxiety about leaving her.”

It’s true. In those days, we either stayed home or took Ruby out with us. But when she was almost a year old,

Joe got his first starring role in an off-Broadway show and I wanted to go to opening night. So I asked Carlos, our super, if he knew any experienced babysitters.

“Somebody honest and reliable and caring” is what I told Carlos, but what I was thinking was, *somebody who won't smack the baby, or steal the baby, or hurl the baby against the wall in a crack-induced frenzy*. Carlos recommended his sister Catalina, who looked nice enough when she arrived. She was a short, middle-aged woman with an enormous bosom and a warm, shy smile. Her English wasn't great then, and this is the part of the story where Joe likes to announce that although I had boasted for years about speaking conversational Spanish, it turned out only to be true if the conversation is limited to greeting words. After saying *hola* and *cómo estás*, Catalina and I just stood there grinning nervously at each other.

“Miss, where is the baby?” Catalina finally asked, and then she laughed with delight when she saw Ruby smiling up at us from her high chair behind me. For some reason I had been blocking her from Catalina's view with my body.

“*¡Que linda!*” she exclaimed, clapping her hands and winking at Ruby, and Ruby laughed and clapped her hands along with Catalina. She *is* linda, I thought to myself. How can we go out and leave our beautiful, *linda* daughter here with a complete stranger? But we did leave her there. We left her laughing and clapping with Catalina, and although I tried to get Ruby's attention as we walked out the door, she didn't seem to notice we were leaving.

“I like that the babysitter is older,” I said to Joe in what I hoped was a breezy, casual tone on the way down in the elevator. I was clutching the handrail and forcing myself to breathe. *She's not a stranger. She's Carlos's sister.*

“She seems nice,” said Joe. And then he stepped right up behind me and pulled me close, his arms traversing my chest and his face buried deep in the curve of my neck. “I'm really, really fuckin' nervous,” he whispered into my hair, and I said, shakily, “I know. Me too.”

Joe stiffened then and said, “I mean I'm nervous about the show.”

“I know,” I lied. “Me too.”

After the show, there was a cast party at a bar on Bleecker Street, and I walked over with Joe's agent, Simon. Joe arrived a little later with the cast and it was a great party. A grown-up party! I hadn't been out at night in ages, and now here I was with people who talked about things like auditioning and making art and finding a drummer for their band. Nobody talked about weaning and Ferberizing babies, everybody raved about Joe's performance, and I was having the time of my life. Within minutes I was doing things I hadn't done in ages—flirting, smoking, drinking—and it was a good hour before I told Joe that I wanted to call Catalina and check on the baby.

“I'll call,” said Joe, and he found a pay phone in the back. I watched him dial the number, and then the man next to me started talking about Joe. It was somebody from the *New York Times*. The *Times*! I introduced Joe when he returned, and after he talked to the writer for a minute, he turned to me and said, “We have to go.”

“Everything all right?” I asked, and Joe said, “Sure,” but when we went outside and got into a cab, he told me that nobody had answered the phone when he called. He had called twice. No answer.

“Now, don't freak out,” Joe said. “I'm sure they're fine.”

I was bent over, jackknifed, hugging my knees, breathing in . . . and out.

“Maybe they went out for a walk,” Joe said, and I considered this. I thought about Catalina putting Ruby in her stroller. I imagined Catalina and Ruby riding the elevator down to the lobby and then casually strolling outside, where Catalina would place baby Ruby in a van driven by men wearing masks. I thought about Ruby crying for me as they drove across the Triborough Bridge to . . . who knew where . . . dark, wretched baby-selling lands . . . Ruby and Catalina and the men wearing masks.

Breathing in . . . and . . . out.

But Catalina didn't sell Ruby! When we threw open the door of our apartment, we found Catalina sitting

happily on the couch watching Spanish television. Ruby was asleep in her crib. I had unplugged the phone that afternoon while Ruby and I napped and had forgotten to plug it back in. We all laughed with relief over the confusion and Catalina told me about a home remedy she thought I should try for Ruby's cough. Something to do with honey and milk and warm, weak tea that she had used for her own children when they were babies in Nicaragua. Now I thought about Catalina as we sat there crowded around that cluttered table at Pastis, Karen and Brian and Joe and me. I thought about how I had wanted to climb into Catalina's lap that night thirteen years ago, how I had wanted to climb into her lap and be cradled in her plump arms like a baby. In my ear was *horny* this and *motherfucker* that.

*This girl is young, I thought. Just listen to the mouth on her.*

If I had charged my phone the night before that dinner with the Metzgers—if I had made it a habit to *just plug it in each night*, as Joe had repeatedly advised me, I might never have heard her breathy sex talk, that fresh, foul purr that poured into my ear like contaminated runoff. And who knows, I might have gone on forever like that. Unaware. But I hadn't charged my phone. Instead, I left it in that old red nylon bag—that ugly old red bag that hung from the back of Sammy's stroller. Just left it there, turned on, until the wallpaper photograph of Joe's smiling face on the screen slowly faded to black.

For the record, I didn't mean to dial Joe's number that night. It was an accident, I don't care what Joe says. It was out of habit—I called Joe a lot, and I rarely dialed my own number. And our cell phone numbers are almost identical. Mine ends with 8804 and his ends with 8803, but it wasn't until that night at Pastis that I discovered we both had the same code to access our messages. The PIN number is what it's called, and 7829 was the number we had used for our ATM cards ever since Ruby was born.

It was RUBY on any keypad. 7829.

It was our daughter's first name, but in numerical form it had become the sentinel for most of the other things we held dear—our wealth, our safety, our privacy. It was my AOL password and my PayPal code, and as Joe's success grew, it was how we accessed our online mutual funds and individual investment accounts. When we bought our beach house, it became the code for the alarm system. Once Sammy was born, I had tried to use his name, 72669, for other codes—it seemed like the fair, impartial thing to do—but I could never remember when to use each child's name, so I used 7829 for everything. I typed it in as my code when Joe's assistant, Catherine, gave me my new cell phone, and apparently that's what Joe typed into his phone, too.

I borrowed Karen's phone again before we left the restaurant. I went to the ladies' room and I dialed Joe's number. I held on to the sink, punched in 7829, and there she was.

*"Hi, babe, thanks for the message. I can't believe you had to ask if I'm happy, baby, you know I am...."*

Half an hour later, I stood in our kitchen, in the dark. Joe was taking a shower and I tapped out the code one more time.

7829.

My thumb knew exactly where the numbers were. I didn't have to look.

*"I'm horny as a motherfucker....I just thought you should know that, baby."*

That lilting, sultry voice. Southern, that's for sure. And the mouth on her.

Then, the crisp, automated female voice. My familiar Nextel friend: *"To repeat this message, press eleven."*

11.

*"Hi, babe, thanks for the message. I can't believe you had to ask if I'm happy, baby, you know I am...."*

"Julia," Joe called from the bedroom, "are you coming to bed or what?"

"Shhh! Joe! You'll wake the kids! I'll be there in a minute."

*"To repeat this message, press eleven."*

11.

*“Hi, babe, thanks for the message. I can’t believe you had to ask if I’m happy, baby, you know I am...”*

It was 1:33. The digits on the microwave clock emitted a miniature aura—a pale emerald haze that seemed to hang in the air in the dark. The refrigerator hummed lazily and every few seconds the freezer tumbled ice. From the street below came the sound of two raised voices, one singing in a hollow, drunken tone, the other inexplicably yelling, “Hey! . . . Hey!”

*“I’m horny as a motherfucker...”* said the voice in my ear.

“Hey!” cried the voice from the street. “HEY!”

The Golden Globe nominations had been announced live, on national television, two weeks before our dinner with the Metzgers. The announcement was scheduled for eight-thirty, during the morning news shows, which was the same time that our son, Sammy, was supposed to be at preschool. It was the last day of school before the holidays, and at first I had considered sending Sammy to school with Catalina. Then I decided to take him myself—I wanted to be distracted from the excruciating suspense of it all. This wasn’t the first time there was a lot of hype surrounding Joe and his show. The year before, I woke up early and waited three hours for the announcements. All the critics had insisted that Joe deserved it, that he was guaranteed a nomination. Although Joe went off to the gym, so as not to “jinx” himself, I had watched the morning news with a sense of impending glory, the phone on my lap, ready to dial Joe the second his name was called out. I watched the new 007 guy and America’s Sweetheart read off the list of nominees, and when they skipped Joe altogether, I honestly thought they had made a mistake. I sat there and watched for several minutes before the network switched back to the regular broadcast and then I made the unhappy call to Joe, but he already knew. He had been running in front of the TV. I imagined his shoulders sagging with disappointment and his feet slowing down on the rushing treadmill when they announced the other nominees, and I wondered if he was carried backward, just for a moment, before he was able to regain his stride. A week later, on Christmas morning, Ruby presented Joe with a Golden Globe award she had made out of papiermâché, carefully replicating the trophy from a photo she found on Wikipedia. She had painted a bronze-colored plaque on the Styrofoam base and etched in the words “Best Performer in the Role of Father.” Joe had displayed it proudly on a bookshelf, where it remained for several months, but at some point it ended up in a toy box (four-year-old Sammy sometimes used it as a sword), and that was the last I saw of it.

This year I had opted for a different tack. Joe wanted to watch the announcements live, and I decided I’d rather be told the news, so we planned to meet for breakfast afterward. I was looking at my menu when he arrived at our favorite neighborhood spot. I wasn’t really reading it, just using it as a diverting focal point, and when I glanced up, there he was, a Yankees cap pulled down low over his eyes, moving between tables, ducking around waitresses and waiters.

*Christmastime . . . is here*, chimed the child-chorus from the recording of *A Charlie Brown Christmas* that the diner had been playing every day for the past week.

A man seated at a nearby table called out, “Hey, Joey Ferraro! How’s it goin’?” and Joe nodded at him. “It’s going great, man, thanks.”

Then he sat down beside me and glanced up from under the brim of his cap, grinning.

“Oh . . . my . . . God,” I said slowly, reacting to his grin with my own. I bit my lip, searching his eyes cautiously, but I knew.

“I got it.”

“I knew you would!” I cried, and Joe grabbed the seat of my chair and pulled it right up next to his. He kissed me, and when he let me go, I was blinking back tears and laughing.

“I wish I saw them announce it,” I said. “I should have had Catalina take Sammy to school. Who else was nominated?”

“I need a coffee. Where’s the waitress? I’m starving,” said Joe, as if it were just another day, but then he placed his palms down on the table and pushed his shoulders back, causing his chair to tilt up onto its hind legs, and he grinned at the ceiling for a moment. He rocked forward a few seconds later, letting the chair slam back onto all fours, and he beat the table like a bongo drum. “I’m fucking starving.”

We ordered our breakfast from Zara, the waitress who had been serving us breakfast for years, and Joe told me about turning on the *Today* show just seconds before his nomination was announced.

“I thought I missed it, but I turned it on and the category they were announcing was for Best Actor, TV Drama. I was the first name they read. Joseph Ferraro. *The Squad*.”

“When do we go to L.A.?” I asked.

“I think the show is on January 22. It’s a Sunday. We’ll probably go out Friday.”

“The twenty-second is Dad’s birthday,” I said. “You know I like to take the kids up to see Dad on his birthday.”

“So go see him the weekend after,” Joe said. “He won’t know the difference.”

“Yeah,” I said. And it really wouldn’t make any difference to Dad. He thought Gerald Ford was the president and that I was married to an astronaut. He told me that the last time I visited, told me how proud he was. I had asked one of the nurses if I should try to correct him when he was confused like that, and she just shrugged and said, “Nah, what’s the point? It’s easier on everyone if you just go along. Act as if.”

By the time Zara brought our eggs, Joe had shut off the ringer on his phone, but it continued to vibrate nonstop, and he would look at the caller ID each time and tell me who was calling without answering. “That’s Scott.” “It’s somebody from the UK.” “It must be Frank.” “Mom.” He smiled each time he checked. “By the way,” he said, popping his last crust of toast into his mouth, “Brian Metzger called right after the nominations. He just wrapped that scifi movie. They want to have dinner.”

“After Christmas,” I said, and then I said, “I’m really proud of you, baby.”

He nodded, grinning broadly, drumming the table with his palms like a teenager.