

## "That I can sit at work and **NANCY SINATRA** can call To have Denise Brown call me. **I GET HIGH** on that

MISS UNDERSTOOD, working a Kabuki Streisand with Marie Antoinette hair and glitter

lips, shimmies around on six-inch platforms, seesawing a black G-string aggressively through the crotch of her fishnets.

"I fucking hate that shit," says A. J. Benza, throwing back a shot of whiskey.

The lava lamps of Tunnel's Cosmic Cavern give A.J.'s hair an eerie glow. A.J.'s hair always shines, the Aveda oil combed back in an optimal refractory arc, but here in Kenny Scharf's ostensible kitsch future, A.J.'s retro do makes him stick out like an Amish guy at the Wiz. Although he's brought along Mario and Adolfo and a couple of the other "guys he runs with" from Brooklyn, this isn't really his kind of place.

"I hate all drag queens," A.J. says.

But A.J.'s getting some items. A.J. will go anywhere to get items.

A glazed-and-baked Miss Piggy in white angora approaches A.J. She's a publicist, "one of my yentas," A.J. says. Miss Piggy tells A.J. that Whoopi Goldberg has been calling up the mayor, bitching about how cars parked near the set—of her new movie, *The Associate*—keep getting towed. "If he doesn't do something, she says, she's gonna move everything to Toronto," Miss Piggy stage-whispers in A.J.'s ear, above the Tunnel's snarling techno-pop. A.J. nods; that's an item.

Pierced-septum club waifs with doe eyes watch him, wondering whether he could make them famous. A.J.'s busy.

At the bar, a boy sidles up to a guy who looks like Sal Mineo. "Are you A.J.?"

Sal Mineo just points to the middle of

the room. There, a Hell's Angel is telling A.J. how he saw Sean Penn at Scores getting table dances and "acting like an animal."

Not an item. "I'm not gonna print that," A.J. says. "I like Sean."

By 1 A.M., A.J. is out of there and climbing into his gray Nissan 240SX. "Everybody's a rat," A.J. says. "Everybody tells on everybody."

"It makes my job shitty, because you never know who's talking about you." A.J. sighs. "That part of the job I can't stand. It makes my stomach turn sometimes."

Next stop, Boom. Then Bowery Bar. Then Spy. Then Lemon. Every night, not necessarily in that order, at close to the speed of light. A.J.'s gotten so many tickets for wild driving, when he goes to L.A. he has to rent from a no-questions-asked operation run by a Pakistani guy who thinks he's a TV star.

"Harry Ace," A.J. says. "I gave him some wine and a snake plant to keep him happy."

He grabs his cellular. The buttons glow in the dark of the Nissan.

"Hey baby," A.J. says. "You doing good, baby?" A.J. calls everybody *baby*, from supermodels to the director of communications for the mayor. ("Baby?" Cristyne Lategano snapped back, the story goes. "Come on, Cristyne," A.J. told Lategano. "I call all girls baby." "Girls?!")

A.J.'s depressed. On New Year's Eve he broke up with his "girl," and when he isn't talking to her on the cell phone, he's talking about her. "One minute we're having champagne and a bubble bath, and the next minute I'm hailing a cab in my pajamas." He shakes his head.

"FROM BUBBLE BATH TO BITTER BREAKUP." A.J. likes to talk in *Daily News* headlines.

Though he seems truly torn up about

Rebecca, a petite Puerto Rican bartender-model ("She taught me I should take vitamins," A.J. says nostalgically), A.J. doesn't mind talking about other women either. "I love women. Wine and women." Yes, he went out with Nancy Sinatra. "She's Frank's daughter—how could you pass it up?" (He admits he struck out.) He had this brief, you know, *thing* with Patti Davis ("She's, like, deep—*too* deep") and a briefer thing with a not-to-be-named supermodel. "It was just one night. It was like climbing Mount Everest." Then there was this other night, with a famous young blonde actress who A.J. thought was Drew Barrymore. "I was a little drunk. I didn't stay long. The next morning, she had to do *Regis and Kathie Lee*."

And then there was the time A.J. walked up to Robert De Niro at a party and told him they'd just "broken up with the same beautiful Jamaican girl."

"He didn't really want to talk about it," A.J. says.

That's okay, because A.J. knows there are names—boldface names—who do want to talk about it, names who invite A.J. to their parties and even put him in their movies. Names who might even consider A.J. a friend.

"I would have him here," says legendary Hollywood bad boy-producer Robert Evans. "He's fun."

A.J. has stories: backyard weenie roasts in Greenwich Village with Warren Beatty, party-hopping with Mickey Rourke and Abel Ferrara, naked swimming in the grotto at Hef's mansion. A.J. sometimes breakfasts at the Carlyle with Dan Rather.

"Dan knows I have a fucking edge," A.J. says.

"To me, that I can sit at work and Nancy Sinatra can call me and just want to bullshit is one of the coolest things in the world." A.J. is cutting off the cars getting

# me is one of the COOLEST THINGS IN THE WORLD. stuff. I'm sorry for feeling that way, but I think it's great."

in his way in East Side traffic. "To me, at the height of the O.J. trial, to have Denise Brown call me at my girlfriend's house. . . . I get high on that stuff. I'm sorry for feeling that way, but I think it's great. I'm still in awe of certain people and getting close to certain people."

**A**MERE FOUR YEARS AGO, A.J. was just another "guinea from Brooklyn" who couldn't get past the velvet ropes at the Manhattan clubs he was hitting every night, hunting for stories to feed to Linda Stasi, his mentor at *New York Newsday* (and later the *Daily News*). Today, at 33, A. J. Benza is on his way to attaining the kind of celebrity he's wanted since he saw Sinatra at Madison Square Garden in 1974.

"It was chills all night," A.J. says.

In his daily "Hot Copy" and Sunday "Downtown" columns, A.J. has perfected—if that's the right word—a new genre of gossip: hard-boiled tattle. It's a form that fits so comfortably into the *Daily News* demographic that you wonder why they didn't try it before.

"Fucking be real about everything," A.J. says, before launching into a series of ready-made reality sound bites.

"Tommy Lee [Jones]—say no to a script once in a while.

"*Friends* stars—stay home every once in a while.

"Diane Sawyer—you ass-kissed Michael Jackson on national television and gave journalism a bad name."

A.J. is the most ubiquitous gossip on television: daily on the E! network's *The Gossip Show*, frequently on *Hard Copy*, *Geraldo*, *Entertainment Tonight*, the USA Network, the Movie Channel, Showtime,

occasionally on Rolonda, Montel, assorted talk shows. "Leeza wants me to come to L.A.?" A.J. says smarmily, for effect. "I say, sure, hey, where you putting me up?"

In December, E! signed A.J. to develop his own talk show. "He's very New York," says L.A.-based E! senior vice-president of programming Fran Shea, who invented *Talk Soup* and brought Howard Stern to national TV. "He has the kind of personality where some people love him, some people hate him. I don't care if people hate him. Some people will turn him on just to hate him."

The "Downtown" column has become a serial autobiography of A.J.'s swinging life and superswinging friends—a kind of *Goodfellas*-meets-*Great Expectations*, a *fin de siècle* rat pack. He broke the news of his E! show there, proclaiming it a "hip *Joe Franklin Show*" in which A.J. might "accompany Mickey Rourke to his therapist appointment and learn the fine art of celebrity dieting with the Barbi twins." He quoted Hef advising him after the Rebecca breakup, "I don't believe you're ready for commitment."

"And then there's *Ransom* and me," A.J. wrote of his five-minute role in the upcoming Mel Gibson vehicle, directed by Ron Howard. "I play a determined reporter in this one—*stretch*."

"He has a hood quality that's good for movies," says Brian Grazer, Howard's partner and producer.

Famous people seem to want A.J. to be famous, maybe because they don't encounter many guys who so embody what A.J. calls "the real real."

"He strikes me as a for-real person," says Grazer. "He looks you in the eye when you talk to him. He's a colorful guy in an unartificial way."

"He's like Popeye," says Evans. "I am what I am."

"When I see a girl I know I really want to fuck," A.J. is telling me in the car, "my asshole tightens up for a second. *Just a second.*"

A.J. IS AT RAO'S, THE EXCLUSIVE, ten-table Upper East Side Italian restaurant where, A.J. says, wiseguys have been known to show up. Also Scorsese. Nicholas Pileggi. Tony Danza. And A.J., on probation. A.J. once wrote something ungenerous about Rao's eclectic clientele "and they took me in the back and sat me down and talked to me about it. It was like being called into the fucking principal's office."

A guy in a salmon-colored suit at the end of the bar stares at us with alligator eyes.

In the bathroom, a woman is crying. "Fourteen years I been married to him," she sobs. "I know. I know how it is," soothes her friend. They apply lipstick.

Nicky "Vest," the bartender with the Gotti-esque silver hair, showcases a sleek Versace waistcoat tonight.

"I like the vest," says A.J.

"A customer gave it to me," Nicky says, pouring A.J. his usual, double espresso and Sambuca. "It was too small on me, so I had the tailor let it out." He shows A.J. the handiwork.

"Yeah," says A.J., "it looks good."

We sit at the bar. A.J. keeps his leather jacket on the whole time. He's telling me about how he became a bookie, a story that, like most stories of A.J.'s pre-fabulous days, is really about his father.

"I loved him—he was my hero," A.J. says. "He was just like De Niro; that's why I love De Niro so much." A.J. has six pictures of the actor up in his bedroom, and three of his father.

"My dad was a real tough guy." A narcotics cop turned carpet salesman, Al (like A.J., Alfred Joseph) Benza once held the record for the biggest drug bust in history, A.J. says. Al Benza nailed Saul Gelb, heir apparent to Waxy Gordon, the infamous gambling kingpin of the late forties. A.J.'s great-uncle Happy Maione was on the other side—"They called him Happy cause he was always mad." Happy, a prolific hit man for Meyer Lansky, died in the electric chair.

"If I had to pick my last meal," A.J. says, "I'd have a bowl of my mother's pasta—marinara sauce. Any Italian kid'll tell you that."

Anyway, A.J. says, back in 1983, he was a journalism major at Long Island University's C. W. Post College when his father "got cancer bad." So A.J. had to start making "big money—fast," to pay the

mortgage on the family home in West Islip, where they'd moved from Bensonhurst in the late sixties.

"I knew sports," he says, swishing his espresso around. A photo of Jerry Lewis beams hysterically at us from the wall. "And I knew how to bullshit people."

So he became a bookie.

"Twenty-one years old—you'd have to be a drug dealer to make more money than I was making. It was ridiculous," A.J. says. "I had men across the country paying me money for my advice. I had men send me watches in the mail, tickets to shows, money for my birthday.

"But I was 21 years old, and I didn't mind if I was stealing money from people. I didn't care.

"Once, I met a man on the phone from Colorado, and I convinced him of a scam. I said, 'I'm going to Las Vegas, and five of my best customers, they're all giving me \$50,000, and I'm gonna go to Vegas and in a week's time—everybody's gonna make four or five times their payment.'

"I was bullshitting him—I wasn't talk-

ing to nobody but him. He was a stockbroker, this guy—he looked like Richard Dreyfuss. So I went with my friend Big Tony. We took a limousine to Caesars Palace.

"Twenty-one years old. This is the kind of balls we're talking about. Richard Dreyfuss met us with a valise just like in the movies. I'm in the back of the limousine, Dreyfuss is in the front, and he's got 48,500—he's short seventeen. And—who do I think I am—I say, 'Rich, you're short seventeen.' And he says, 'What?' I went by the name of Johnny back then, Johnny Rourke, like Mickey Rourke—it came from the character in *Reckless* 'cause I loved the movie. So Rich says, 'You're kidding me.' This guy starts pulling hundreds out of his back pocket, his front coat pockets, and sure enough, he says, 'Johnny, call me in a couple days and tell me how you're doing'—and he leaves.

"So of course, 21 years old, I wasn't smart enough to get on a plane and go home. I didn't do that. We gambled it,

and we fucking lost it—all. Lost it all in three days. I had to call Rich the next day and tell him we lost it all and I needed 12,000 Western Unioned to me.

"And he sends it. Why? Because I was a really good bullshitter and I made him believe I had some really good information on some games. I'll never forget it. I told him I was betting the Toronto Blue Jays doubleheader and needed 12,000—cash—and he did it. I went home and gave my mother 6,000 and I bought a Mazda RX-7 for 6,000 cash."

"A.J.," I say, "don't you mind if any of this gets printed?"

"I don't give a shit," A.J. says, pocketing the three coffee beans at the bottom of his glass. He keeps them in a special bowl at home for luck. "Who's gonna say what?"

SCORES, THE UPSCALE STRIP CLUB ON EAST 60th, is where A.J. gets the best items. "You can approach a guy at Scores," A.J. says. "The common denominator is naked women."

**"I had men across the country PAYING ME MONEY FOR MY ADVICE. I had men send me watches in the mail, tickets to shows, money for my birthday.**

**But I was 21 years old, and I DIDN'T MIND if I was stealing money."**

A.J. swings into the mirrored pleasure dome with the same air of eager expectation I notice him exhibiting, some days later, before eating a whole Domino's pizza courtside at a Knicks game.

But Scores is dead. Strippers dance for empty chairs, looking bored. No Sean. No Bruce and Demi.

"I'm on O.J. watch," A.J. says. "He's in town, and I know he's gonna wind up here."

No O.J.

Lonnie, the Scores publicist, comes up to A.J. and gives him the big-guy handshake, hand-to-hand and other-hand-to-upper-arm. A.J. puts his hands on people a lot, like punctuation. Italian men he kisses on both cheeks. His hands are laden with silver rings, each one given to him "by someone who loves me," A.J. says.

A.J. is seated at a VIP table next to a wall of TV screens. Coincidentally, the TVs are showing A.J.'s face on *The Gossip Show*.

"Hey, A.J., you're in 3-D." A young engineer from *The Howard Stern Show* has come over to pay his respects.

A.J.'s been a regular of Stern's ever since he told the show's professional prank caller, "Captain Janks," that he was "going to hurt him." They'd had a clash at a Stern birthday party, where Janks called A.J. "a two-faced ass."

"There'll be two hits, Janks," A.J. said on air. "Me hitting you and you hitting the floor." (Somehow, A.J. and Janks made up by the end of the segment.)

"I'm a fighter, always have been." It's another legacy, A.J. says, from his dad. "My father could be the funniest guy at the party, but if somebody said the wrong thing to my mother, it was Jake La Motta. I grew up seeing beatings in the street."

When the basketball coach at West Islip High wouldn't play A.J. enough because he was always wearing loud sneaks and sweats ("I was a hot dog"), Al drove his son over to the guy's house to throw hard green tomatoes through his windows and let the air out of his tires. Al just laughed at his son's antics, like when A.J. tipped a 60-year-old high-school social-studies teacher out a window. "It was only one story. Me and Chico threw her grade book out the window, and when she leaned out to get it we lifted her out by the legs."

"People are afraid of me," A.J. continues, making it not sound like bragging. And then he proceeds to give examples.

There was the time he offered to rough up the playboy Steven Greenberg because Greenberg called A.J.'s then-boss, Linda Stasi, a very bad word. "If he'd just called her a bitch, I might've let it go, but I can't have that." (The men patched up their differences later.)

There was the time when a Farrakhan

fanatic offered to teach A.J. a lesson for breaking the news that the Nation of Islam leader started his career as a calypso singer with a hit about a transvestite titled "Is You Is or Is You Ain't?" "Come and get me," A.J. says he told the caller. "I'll be at the corner of 42nd and Seventh. I'm the Italian guy with slicked-back hair." The caller didn't appear.

And there was the time a "lunatic lawyer" turned up at the *Daily News* with his feet on A.J.'s desk, demanding a correction A.J. didn't think was warranted. "Go buy yourself a better toupee; you look like Dondi," A.J. told the attorney, flinging a fistful of change at his head. "You're not doing so well yourself with the hair, kid," retorted the intruder. (A.J. has confided to his readers his "concern over male-pattern baldness.") "But it's funny," he says. "If I want to know if I think a girl's really pretty, I try to imagine what she'd look like bald."

Then there was the time a few weeks ago when A.J. threatened Nick Paumgarten, a writer who made the mistake of going ahead with a profile on him for the *New York Observer* after A.J. had told him he'd already pledged his loyalty to a *New York Magazine* profile. Also, Paumgarten was calling up to check on some unflattering (and, as it turned out, untrue) stories about A.J. "I said I wasn't some Oxford-wearing J-school graduate and I wasn't going to be doing this forever," A.J. confessed after getting off the phone with Paumgarten. "I said if he went that low on that story, he was going to have to look over his shoulder for the rest of his life."

"A.J.," I said. "He's going to put that in his article."

"Hey," A.J. said. "I told him it was off the record."

Paumgarten declined to comment on the exchange, which he did not report; neither did he report any of the unflattering stories.

Then there was the time, a week later, when A.J. threatened me. I'd spent a whole night watching him collect stories, never setting pen to paper, so I teased him: "Don't you ever take any notes?"

A.J. pointed to his head.

"I got it all in here."

"What are you?" I laughed. "Truman Capote?"

A.J. turned, his black eyes like marbles, and stuck a finger in my face. "I'll never hit a woman. But just remember—I *know* people."

A few minutes later, A.J. had the hands on my arm and my back. "You hurt me," he said, all puppy dog. "I'm a good reporter."

A dancer sits down with us at Scores. She's about 22, wearing a long green halter gown that barely covers her nipples. "Hi, A.J.!" Kiss, kiss.

A.J. stares at her and frowns. "How'd you get that bump on your head?"

"Trashing my boyfriend's apartment." A fluttering hand covers the swollen spot on her forehead.

"Yeah, right," A.J. says. "Why don't you know better?"

"What does a Jewish stockbroker want with her?" he asks ruefully when she's out of earshot. A.J.'s drinking red wine. He doesn't do drugs or even smoke, he says, but when he drinks, he drinks like a shark—constantly, steadily.

Maybe it's the setting that brings this out of him, but A.J. starts talking about how he "had to marry a virgin." He'd been married to a junior-high-school teacher for five years when their union began to unravel. "I was married to Mary Ann, and now I wanted to fuck Ginger."

So he started driving into the city from Long Island every night to check out the clubs, to make the scene. By this time, he'd gone legit and survived a stint selling "TV guides and shit" over the telephone, and for a full seven years had been working at *New York Newsday* at night as a part-time high-school and college sports-writer.

"I was fucking nowhere," A.J. says. "There were some stuffy old men [at *Newsday*] who were just very afraid to let A.J. be A.J." He'd done some memorable work, though, covering the trial of John Gotti in 1990. His access to the mob boss's inner circle came through what F. Scott Fitzgerald called "a gonnegtion." "I have a third cousin," A.J. says. "He knew the right people and everybody liked each other and helped each other out and that kind of shit."

"It's so funny how life is," A.J. says. "I found out that the most powerful, sinister criminals in the world, No. 1, have big hearts and are very funny, and No. 2, when their fate is resting in the jury's hands and they walk across the street from this restaurant [Giambone's], they were making fart jokes in the park. I know he was concerned about his life, but here was John Gotti, 'Sammy the Bull' Gravano, Bobby Borriello, farting in the park and making jokes about it. It was just so cool, if you wrote it into a movie you'd say it was bullshit. . . ."

When stories like this one were ignored by his *Newsday* editors, A.J. vowed he'd show them. "I said bullshit. I'm never going to go and live in fucking Texas for three years covering crime blotters. I'll stick it out here." Newly separated from his wife, A.J. embarked on the beginning of a new beginning: He "made his bones" as a gossip.

"It's '91," he says, "and both parents are dead, I got no wife, and now I start going into the city. I started going out like crazy, dating everybody. I mean, I was dating every girl. I wanted to know what

redheads were like, what blondes were like. Every time there was a girl I thought was cute, I dated her.

"And I started to see some cool shit at night, and I started being infatuated with it. Celebrities and athletes, SoHo, Tatou, the Palladium, Metro C.C. I couldn't get into a lot of these places—it was so frustrating.

"But it all changed for me in April '92. It was *Vogue's* a-hundredth-birthday party at the New York Library. I crashed it. I didn't know anybody there. But I said fuck it, I'm getting in. And I got in. I wouldn't know Anna Wintour if she bit me on the ass.

"So I'm crashing it. I look to my left and Mickey Rourke's crashing it, too, and he was one of my favorite actors. He and I start talking—he's crashing 'cause he and his girlfriend at the time [and now his wife], Carre Otis, were fighting, and he was banned from getting in. So we're talking, and he says, 'I'm gonna go to Metro C.C. afterwards, that's where the party's going,' and I went with him.

"And I saw a lot of hot shit at that party—I'll never say their names, but I saw supermodels making out with supermodels. It blew my mind. . . . I came from a world where I was at my in-laws' house watching Bill Cosby on a Thursday night with crumb cake and coffee, and all of a sudden I'm at Metro C.C., watching the biggest names in modeling, women, making out with each other all night long? It blew my mind. So I called Linda Stasi the next day—she was writing for 'Inside New York' at *New York Newsday*—and I told her, 'I saw something last night. . . .'

Stasi hired him as her legs. "He was consumed with going out," she says. "He was unique, a real character. And I figured, let him fly." In 1992, she brought A.J. with her to the *Daily News* when she started "Hot Copy." (Co-gossip Michael Lewittes came onboard a month later.) Last year, when Stasi started writing her eponymous *Daily News* column, Benza and Lewittes took over "Hot Copy," and Benza simultaneously began doing his solo "Downtown."

"Let's get out of here," A.J. says, throwing down a twenty. A.J. always leaves \$20 tips. He won't let me pay for anything, even though we're here on business and I could get reimbursed by the magazine.

"I just don't like that," he grumbles, "—girls paying."

A.J.'S DUPLEX APARTMENT ON MADISON AND 37th Street explodes with little dogs—three Yorkshire terriers named Cesare, Mercedes, and Marcella. Every month, A.J. takes them down to Le Chien on First Avenue, where "they get nice." Their toenails clatter on the parquet as they follow A.J. around in a pack. "This is how I am

every night." He lies down on an avocado leather couch in front of the television. Cesare, Mercedes, and Marcella jump up and arrange themselves on his leg, stomach, and chest, respectively. "They fucking love me.

"This one is the best." He picks up Cesare like a football by the back of the neck. The dog goes limp. "He'll let me do anything to him." He dangles Cesare by his hind legs so the dog looks dead. A.J. laughs and lets him down. Cesare runs off, grabs a stray sock, and growls as A.J. comes to get it.

"You some kind of badass?" His voice echoes through the apartment. The dog growls like the buzz of a swarm of gnats.

**H**OT COPY" ISN'T NECESSARILY considered the best column in the city, but A.J. and Michael—the Fonz and Richie," as one colleague describes them—have made it a contender. "There are some days when their page looks as good as or better than our page," says fellow *Daily News* columnist George Rush (who, with his wife, Joanna Molloy, writes "Rush & Molloy").

The "Hot Copy" office is strewn with *Playboy* and *Penthouse* magazines, and as any viewer of *The Gossip Show* can tell you, the wall behind A.J.'s desk is littered with photos of women with large breasts.

The fax machine whirs with incoming press releases. The "boys," as Stasi once called them, sit glued to the phones, Lewittes mouthing conspiratorially into the receiver, A.J. barking at whoever's on the speaker.

"Gimme something really dirty today." A.J.'s talking to a female publicist. "Don't you handle anybody really filthy?"

"Well," she squeaks from the box, "I got this [medium-level actress]—"

"What?" A.J. asks. "Who?"

"She's in [medium-level movie] and she's half-naked all the time from the waist up. . . ."

Not dirty enough.

"You get the publicists who'll sell out their clients, and you're set," chuckles A.J. "It's all a trade-off: I run some bullshit thing, then they give me something hot."

Soon though, A.J. is berating another female publicist. "You don't get me shit," A.J. says. "You don't get me nothing."

"What about that [item about who's dating a famous actress]?" she says.

"That was fucking three weeks ago. Now go and get me something!"

"A.J.," she says with a sigh.

He turns and winks at me. "Gotta make 'em work."

A.J. leans back. He's wearing silky

black pants and a gray untucked shirt hanging to his knees. "My flowing look," he says of the outfit, delivered to his office via messenger from Donna Karan at, A.J. smiles, *a greatly reduced price*.

"Hey," he says, "I still wrote that her men's-wear line wasn't doing too well."

A call comes in: Khoi Nguyen, an assistant at the rival "Page Six," has been detained for possessing marijuana as he got off a plane headed to a Caribbean island. "Yes!" Lewittes says after hanging up with the FBI.

A.J.'s thinking, rubbing his nose. "Aah, we don't want to start a fucking gossip war," A.J. says. "Someday, maybe they'll have some shit on us."

"Yeah, you're right," says Lewittes after a moment. "But I just like knowing it."

"And that *he* knows *we* know it, and we didn't print it," says A.J. (The story is later published in this magazine's "Intelligencer.")

A.J. is wearing his shiniest patent-leather shoes today. (Not the clogs. Not the boots with I.D. bracelets.) They make him look like a dance instructor.

NAOMI SWAGGERS DOWN THE CATWALK IN A corset so tight and teeny-tiny, the men are making Fred Flintstone-like howls. A.J.'s perched at the very end of the runway, his normally darting eyes arrested just now by the approach of Naomi's endless, rippling thighs.

*Last Tuesday was the Super Bowl of my existence: Front-row seats at the Victoria's Secret runway show at the Plaza*, he wrote in "Downtown" that Sunday.

Naomi gives A.J. an acid look, turns sharply on her stilettos, and struts away, her hard rear end shaking out an admonition that seems aimed at him.

"I gotta talk to her." A.J. smears on some Chapstick.

*I ventured backstage only to suffer whiplash, lockjaw and a troublesome bout of sweaty palms.*

In the back room of the fashion show, half-naked supermodels—Frederique, Stephanie Seymour, Veronica Webb, and on and on—are voguing it up for photographers. Everybody's loving it. A.J., perhaps, most of all.

*I was paralyzed. But, let's face it, there are worse things in life.*

"Hi, A.J., I saw you on E!" flirts model Saira Mohan.

"Hey, baby," A.J. says.

"A.J., I'm so mad at you," pouts 22-year-old supermodel Tyra Banks, prom-queen-cute in a ponytail. A.J. ticked her off by writing that she was upset, along with other black models, when Whitney Houston got the January cover of *Harper's Bazaar*.

"That is so totally not me," Tyra says. "I'm happy for any girl who gets a cover."

"Hey, baby," A.J. says, "I didn't mean to do that"—that is, not phone Banks to

**“EVERYBODY REALLY WANTS TO BE A CELEBRITY. We all have those dreams. I just want to be heard. I want to be out there. I want people to hear my voice and see my face. I want to die and people to say, YEAH, I KNOW THAT GUY.”**

check on whether he should include her in the item. “I fucked up. But you’ll see that in print.”

“I want it on TV,” Tyra says levelly.

A.J. promises: “Done.”

“I think it’s wonderful Whitney got it,” Ms. two-covers-this-month-alone scolded me.

Naomi’s going to be harder to soothe. Although A.J.’s never met her, he runs items making fun of her relentlessly. He calls her “one of my targets,” and he’s tweaked her attempted singing career, her TV roles (“Alert the Emmy board,” he quipped), her “alleged” novel, *Swan*. When Campbell was engaged to Adam Clayton of U2, A.J. printed that if she ever became the Yoko Ono of the group, he would “personally hunt her down like a dog in the streets.”

Fifteen cameras flash at their face-off.

“You know, I think you’re really cool,” A.J. says, “and I just don’t want you to be scared of me.”

“No man scares me,” said the woman

who toyed with Mike Tyson as a 19-year-old. After that riposte, I just couldn’t bring myself to ask her about her latest development in her music career, which I do think is scary.

“I think you can take my sense of humor better than most people,” A.J. says.

“That’s probably true,” says Naomi.

They smile.

“I SAW THE DAILIES,” A.J. TELLS ME.

We’re at Cafe Tabac, upstairs. It’s pretty empty. A.J.’s drinking espresso and Sambuca. A.J. wants to talk about seeing the dailies of his scene in *Ransom*.

“I think in my whole life it’s the best thing. To sit down on a Saturday in this little theater next to Mel Gibson and Ron Howard and Renée Russo, and see me on screen talking to Mel Gibson, hearing Ron Howard saying ‘Cut’ and ‘Good take’ and ‘That’s a wrap’ and ‘Print it.’ It’s like, ‘Is this fucking happening?’”

This is what A.J. Benza has always wanted.

“Always, since I was a little boy.” Once, back when he was still married—and going to college, and being a bookie, and slogging away at *Newsday*—A.J. did a role on the pilot of *Loving*.

“I remember Lloyd Bridges’s eyes were blue like sapphires,” A.J. says.

The writing, sure—people always told him he could write. “Even his letters,” says his ex-wife, Jennifer, “could make you laugh or cry.”

But, A.J. says, “everybody really wants to be a celebrity.” His craggy face looks haunted in the candlelight. “We all have those dreams.

“I just want to be heard,” A.J. says. He is leaning across the table, grabbing my arm. “I want to be out there. I want people to hear my voice and see my face. I want to die and people to say, ‘Yeah, yeah, yeah, I know that guy, and here’s proof.”

“Here he was, and here’s the kind of shit he did.”

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