

CONFLAGRATION

By J.J. Jonas

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CAST: JULIA and FRIEND, who plays the alternate parts

Tone changes indicated in the introduction should be sincere and very subtle, not comedic. Tone should continue to reflect subtle changes as if there is subtext in each definition, yet to be revealed, but not overacted. The first two lines are delivered to the audience, but lines immediately following are said in response and reaction to each other.

JULIA: **(with intense focus on the single word)** Fire. **(repeating for emphasis)** Fire.

FRIEND: **(pragmatically)** Defined as the phenomenon of combustion manifested in light, flame, and heat.

JULIA: **(slightly enigmatic, looking at FRIEND)** One of the four elements of the alchemists.

FRIEND: **(more ardently, turning from audience to JULIA)** A burning passion.

JULIA: **(uplifting)** Inspiration.

FRIEND: **(lowered, painfully)** A destructive burning. A severe trial or ordeal.

JULIA: **(changing to almost triumphant tone of the misunderstood genius or willing martyr and turning back to audience)** Brilliancy; luminosity. **(pause)**

FRIEND: **(to audience again)** Derived from the Greek word "pyr." As in "Pyroelectricity": produced by or as if by the action of heat. **(pause, looking at JULIA)** "Pyrotoxic": a feverish illness.

JULIA: **(looking straight ahead)** Pyromancy. **(pause, then slowly, reflecting)** Divination by means of fire or flames.

FRIEND: Baptism...

TOGETHER: ...by fire.

(They look at one another in silence and freeze.)

END OF INTRO

(FRIEND and JULIA cross, indicating transition, giving FRIEND time to prepare for character change. FRIEND plays MOTHER in this scene. Tone changes dramatically to more flippant, less dark.)

JULIA: Mothers worry incessantly. It's in their job description. It is also in their occupational portfolio to make sure we inherit that trait. From the very beginning, we are inundated with the threatening impressions of maternal wisdom.

MOTHER: (**turning to face audience**) If you stick out your tongue like that, your face is going to freeze.

JULIA: This turned out to be a detriment to any medical office visit I had as a child. I developed a phobic fear of anyone who tried to coax me into saying, "Ahhh."

MOTHER: (**rattling off to audience, as if from a list**) Don't count your chickens before they are hatched. Don't tell the devil where your goat is tied. You shouldn't kiss on the first date; when Farmer Jones is getting the milk for free, he doesn't need to buy the cow, dear.

JULIA: My mother grew up in the country. She was very fond of livestock analogies.

(MOTHER begins to clean or sweep around JULIA.)

JULIA: When I traipsed off to South America in search of the Pulitzer Prize, covering stories on drug cartels and mountain rebels, my mom did not offer advice on diplomacy or statistics on the dangers of journalists in Third World countries. She just wanted to make sure I was taking clean underwear.

MOTHER: (**licking her finger and rubbing it on JULIA's face as if to remove a smudge**) You have a little something right there.

JULIA: When I was working with gang kids in the city, she withheld warnings about accidentally walking up on a drug deal or using a hand gesture that could be interpreted as a territorial declaration. She wanted to make sure I wasn't going to get a tattoo.

MOTHER: (**halts in her tracks, horrified**) Oh, you didn't, did you? Oh, my word, tell me you did not get a tattoo! (**back to cleaning**) You know I read an article the other day saying that old tattoos can cause cancer. And you know what kind of girls get tattoos. (**looking hard at JULIA**) THOSE kind of girls.

JULIA: What kind of girls, Mom?

MOTHER: (**looks at her hard again**) You know exactly what I mean. THOSE kind of girls. The kind of girl you're NOT.

JULIA: (**mockingly**) Oh, look, Mom. What's this? (**SHE points to a butterfly tattoo on her ankle, feigning innocence.**) Oh, look, a little butterfly landed on my ankle. How did that get there? (**SHE swooshes her hand near her ankle, as if to try to make a tattooed butterfly fly off**) Look, Mom, it's not flying away! Wow, this is the bravest butterfly I've ever seen. (**SHE starts swatting and slapping at her ankle, as if SHE was trying to kill an insect.**) It's not moving, Mom! This is one heck of a tough butterfly. It's not even moving! Why do you think that is, Mom?

MOTHER: Don't toy with me, Julia. You just had that painted on to try to get my petticoats in a swirl.

JULIA: (**laughing**) Your petticoats in a swirl? (**sarcastically**) Yeah, Mom, I had it painted on... ten years ago. It's amazing how permanent markers can last through the years, huh?

MOTHER: Well, there have been many improvements in tech-nology in the past two decades.

JULIA: Mom, it's a tattoo.

MOTHER: No, it is not. YOU do NOT have a tattoo. **(MOTHER snubs her and, pouting, turns away, facing back.)**

JULIA: Mothers are always giving us warnings. Sometimes I wished I would have listened a little more. Like the one...

MOTHER: **(with crossed arms, still pouting, but turning back around, not able to resist; TOGETHER with JULIA)** ...don't play with matches or you'll wet the bed. **(SHE turns back around.)**

JULIA: I never wet the bed, but the bottom line is... there are always repercussions to everything we do... consequences for every action. There have definitely been consequences to mine... sometimes unbearable consequences... **(pause)** I was about fourteen when it happened. No one was home. My mom and my two sisters had gone out of town shopping and my dad was at work. I was home all alone and well, I had been baking some cookies. I walked out into the garage and opened the freezer. We always baked extra and froze them in coffee cans, so, you know, if you had unexpected company, there would always be something nice to serve with coffee. That sort of thing. I noticed that there was something spilled out on the garage floor. Something that had leaked out.

(FRIEND circles around JULIA, providing the VOICES OF CONSCIOUSNESS.)

VOICE: **(whispering softly)** Don't do it, do it, do it...

JULIA: It was coming out of a metal container.

VOICE: **(hissing whisper)** What if? What if? What if?

JULIA: I'd read something once about burning things off instead of waiting to let them evaporate.

VOICE: **(whispering)** I wonder, wonder, wonder...

JULIA: I know, it sounds stupid, but I'd seen farmers burning off fields, you know, and I thought it might be safe enough.

VOICE: **(whispering)** Of course it's safe, of course, of course...

JULIA: Why else would it be treated so casually?

VOICE: **(whispering)** Why else? Why else? Why else?

JULIA: I was a real science freak as far as curiosity went.

VOICE: **(whispering)** It's just an experiment, an experiment...

JULIA: I loved seeing how things worked.

VOICE: **(whispering)** See how it works, it works, it works...

JULIA: I just wanted to see if it really would work.

VOICE: **(whispering)** See it, see it, see it...

JULIA: I cleared everything out of the way. And then, I lit it with a match.

(FRIEND becomes the fire, personifying the flames as a dancer.)

JULIA: It happened so fast. I don't even know if I remember... it happened so fast. There was an explosion and it knocked me back. I jumped to my feet, frantic. I had to do something. I had to do something!

(Choreographed struggle ensues between JULIA and FLAMES.)

JULIA: Nooooo! This is not happening! Oh, my god, oh my god, oh my god!

(SHE beats back the flames, using blanket or whatever else is near; the FLAMES continue to rise and overpower her. SHE retreats, knowing it is futile. In duet where two chairs are allowed, FLAMES might utilize chair to gain height and show dominance, spreading "wings" and slowly drifting into a dance without effort or struggle, a dance of beauty and power.)

JULIA: I ran back into the house and I called the fire department and then I called my dad, but the phone lines were crackling and I couldn't hear his voice. I knew I had to leave. I grabbed the cat and I ran out the back door and got the dogs and headed out the back gate. I could hear the neighbors yelling. I could hear the sirens in the distance. I sat down there in the alley and stared at the smoke billowing darkly and ominously above our house. I couldn't believe what was happening. It was all so unreal. My best friend found me.

FRIEND: Julia! Julia! ***(grabbing her and yelling to others in distance)*** She's here! She's okay! Come on, Julia, let's get out of here. The smoke is getting bad. They said for us to clear back. There might be more explosions. Do you know if your dad kept any paint or anything in the garage?

JULIA: ***(in somewhat of a trance)*** I did it. It's my fault.

FRIEND: Come on, Julia. Let's go.

JULIA: No, it's my fault. I did this.

FRIEND: ***(looks at her incredulously, then at the fire, then back at JULIA)*** Julia, Julia, listen to me. Just shut up and listen to me. I don't know what you are talking about, but you are going to stop talking about it right this minute. Do you hear me? ***(FRIEND shakes her to get her attention.)*** Julia, listen to me. There are a lot of cops and firemen out there and you can't go out there saying stuff like this. Do you understand? If they even think you did this, your family is not going to ever have a home. Insurance won't cover it. And you are going to be in a lot of trouble. So you just shut your mouth and don't you say anything. If you go out there saying this, you are going to cause more trouble. Keep your mouth shut, Julia. Do you hear me? DO YOU HEAR ME? ***(FRIEND shakes her again. JULIA nods. FRIEND pulls JULIA up by the hand and leads her. JULIA is watching house burn. As SHE stops to watch in horror, FRIEND prepares for character change.)***

JULIA: The neighbors were pulling furniture out of the house, saving as much as they could. Someone went out on the highway to stop my mom and sisters so they wouldn't have to drive up on it unprepared. My oldest sister was the first one out of the car.

BIG SISTER: Oh, my god! Oh, my god, Julia!

JULIA: **(close to tears)** I know. I know.

BIG SISTER: My underwear is trashed all over the yard. Oh, my god, I am so embarrassed! Julia, why did you let them throw my underwear all over the yard? Oh, my god, why didn't you pick it up? What's everyone at school going to say? Oh, my god!

JULIA: My big sister obviously had other things on her mind. I spent the night with my friend that night. We swore together we'd never tell.

FRIEND: **(hooking pinky fingers)** I swear I'll never tell a living soul. I swear it, Julia, I swear it.

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