

the beginning of

**HEART OF THE FIRE** (from **COUPLES**)

a short play by Rich Orloff

*Place:* A bar in the East Village, New York City

*Time:* Late afternoon

*Characters:* JULIE, mid-twenties  
PAUL, about thirty

As the play begins, JULIE, a woman in her mid-twenties who looks like she'd be at home leaning on a bar at an East Village bar, leans on a bar at an East Village bar. She stares at a sheet of paper on the bar. She picks up a pen and starts to write.

JULIE

Dear... scumbag.... You rancid piece of...  
of unmitigated pus... No, that can't be right.  
That looks like "unmitigated puss".

She stops. She doesn't know what she really wants to write, or perhaps she's afraid to face it. PAUL enters. Paul's about thirty and exudes confidence, regardless of how he's feeling. Paul looks like he'd be at home at an Upper East Side yuppie bar. He and Julie look at each other.

PAUL

Do you know how hard it is to come up  
with an opening line at a bar?

JULIE

Do you know how often I've heard that one?

PAUL

I guess after getting an M.F.A., this  
is considered an entry-level position.

JULIE

You know what I like best  
about working here?

PAUL

You save on cigarettes because of  
all the free second-hand smoke?

JULIE

No.

PAUL

You don't have to worry about unruly customers...  
because there are no customers?

JULIE

It's 3:15. Come back in a few hours;  
this place will be packed.

PAUL

Oh, I'm sure it will be chock-full of all those  
East Villagers who like to express their individuality  
by looking like every other East Villager.

JULIE

What I like best about this place is that I  
hardly ever run into anyone who looks like you.

PAUL

Maybe I should pierce my nose.

JULIE

Now there's a fashion trend:  
a stuffed shirt with a pierced nose.

PAUL

Give me a break, will you?

JULIE

I gave you more breaks than I ever should.

PAUL

Julie.

JULIE

I told you a year ago I never wanted  
to see you again, and unlike some people,  
I mean what I say.

PAUL

Hey, I've spent two days looking for you.  
You think I *want* to be here?

JULIE

Nobody forced you.

PAUL

Mom asked me to find you.

JULIE

You could've said "No".

PAUL

She begged me.

JULIE

You could've said "No, thank you."

PAUL

She's in the hospital.

JULIE

I know.

PAUL

She wants to see you.

JULIE

Well, we can't always get what we want.

PAUL

Julie.

JULIE

I've had to accept that, why can't she?

PAUL

Listen, you bitch... she's dying.

JULIE

She's not blaming *that* one on me, is she?

PAUL

What do you want from her?

JULIE

Nothing. And when I find I *do* want something from her, I take a breath and keep breathing until the want fades away.

PAUL

Would it be too hard to visit her once?

JULIE

Why, so you can get points?  
"Hey, Mom, look who I found."

PAUL

Look, I –

JULIE

I will not be your prize in a family scavenger hunt!

PAUL

Why are you always so angry at me?

JULIE

I don't like to take my anger  
out on innocent bystanders.

Paul sits at the bar.

PAUL

Oh, barmaid.

JULIE

Yes, sir?

PAUL

I'd like a drink, please.

JULIE

Let me guess: Cosmopolitan.

PAUL

No.

JULIE

Vanilla Stoli martini?

PAUL

God no.

JULIE

House Chardonnay?

PAUL

Water.

JULIE

You're kidding.

PAUL

Nope.

JULIE

Since when?

PAUL

Four months, 22 days, annnnndd 19 hours,  
more or less.

JULIE

Congratulations.

PAUL  
Thank you.

JULIE  
Program?

PAUL  
Uh-huh.

JULIE  
Which step are you on?

PAUL  
I'm almost up to number two.

JULIE  
So, do you want Poland Spring or Perrier?

PAUL  
Tap.

JULIE  
Were you laid off recently?

PAUL  
No. Work's going great.

JULIE  
Of course.

Julie serves Paul water.

PAUL  
Thanks.

Paul puts several large bills on the bar next to Julie.

JULIE  
I don't know what they're charging for tap water on the Upper East Side, but here it's free.

PAUL  
I tip big.

JULIE  
Is this a bribe?

PAUL  
Consider it my contribution to the arts.

JULIE

I don't need your –

PAUL

Look, I know you're strapped and –

JULIE

What's the price?

PAUL

All I ask – is that you see her.

JULIE

I can't.

Paul puts down two more bills.

PAUL

One time... For her.

Julie rolls up the bills and stuffs them in Paul's pants.

JULIE

Dance.

PAUL

What's wrong with you?!

JULIE

You want *me* to dance, don't you?!

PAUL

Look, you can think whatever you want about me –

JULIE

Thank you.

PAUL

– But she's your mother.

JULIE

And what does that entitle her to?

PAUL

A little respect, for one thing.

JULIE

Respect is earned; it's not an entitlement.

PAUL

She's in pain, Julie.

JULIE

And why do we always have to  
choose *her* pain over ours?

PAUL

A half-hour. You can do it for a half-hour.

JULIE

I know I can do it for a half-hour.  
I did it for my entire childhood.

PAUL

(not knowing what will work)

Jules...

JULIE

Yes, Paulie?

PAUL

Do you really think you're better off  
*not* communicating with her?

JULIE

Actually, I was just writing her a letter.

PAUL

Really?

JULIE

Uh-huh.

PAUL

Would you like me to bring it to her?

JULIE

I don't think so.