

Chemistry

By Jacob Marx Rice

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Characters:

Steph: Mid 20s. Female. Tends bar and suffers from depression. Smart and beautiful but with an edge. An optimist who has seen things fail too often to trust her natural inclination.

Jamie: Mid 20s. Male. Possibly unipolar manic, currently on medical leave from work. Intense, at times bordering on arrogant, but with a strong innocent streak.

Setting:

The play takes place in an apartment that is also the theater that is also occasionally other places (doctor's office, bar, etcetera). The audience is visible to the characters and vice versa.

Monologues:

Monologues in this play should be delivered directly to audience members except when noted. They should not be treated as soliloquies, but rather the characters' attempts to control their stories, as they might do before a jury or on a sleepless night. Like such stories, they represent not truth, absolute or personal, but a desire to shape the truth for themselves and their audience. They must maintain immediacy without becoming precious; they are dialectic but never cold.

Punctuation:

Punctuation follows speech patterns over grammatical convention. Additionally, the following punctuations have the following specific meanings:

A dash (—) indicates an interruption by either the speaker themselves or by a new speaker.

A slash (/) indicates the point of interruption if it is not at the end of the line.

An ellipse (...) indicates a slow trailing off, either on purpose or accidental.

A dash-ellipse (—...) signifies a sudden stop and then a silent continuation of thought.

ACT 1

SCENE 1

(Steph and Jamie stand at either side of the stage, speaking to the audience.)

STEPH

The first time I tried to kill myself, I was eleven. God, that sounds depressing. My mom was fourteen the first time she tried it, and my sister was twelve. Which means, you know, I won. I took a bottle of aspirin, but I didn't eat ahead of time so my mom found me trying to clean up puke-coated pills in our living room. Attractive, right? I was afraid of getting yelled at so I told my pediatrician I thought they were M&Ms. Yes, M&Ms. And she believed me. Sane people are idiots. On the way out, the nurse gave me a lollipop. Because I like candy. Easy answers are so tempting.

JAMIE

In kindergarten, I rocked at finger-painting. The other kids would paint three stick figures next to a house. I was working on tonality, impasto, chiaroscuro. I'm an intense person. I care more than other people. It's who I am. Like college. I was one of three kids in my graduating class to leave the state for college. I went to Georgetown to study international affairs, best program in the country, full scholarship. My first semester, I was the only freshman on the bipartisan action committee, vice president of the class, I ran a youth debate league, plus intermediate tango. Eighteen hours a day for work. Four for sleep, one for exercise and one for meals, showering and socializing. Not at the same time.

STEPH

The second time I tried to kill myself was more advanced. In Chemistry we learned about amygdalin, a natural chemical that becomes the poison cyanide when combined with a certain enzyme. The kernels in a peach pit have amygdaline. Apple seeds are packed with the enzyme. Throw in some lime juice and a banana and, voila, death smoothie. But I miscalculated the dose. Stupid metric system. I was out for three days. My first therapist told me I tried to commit suicide because I was selfish and weak. I told him that his moustache made him look like a pedophile.

JAMIE

After college, I wanted to see the world. We were gonna go to Mexico once, when I was little, but we didn't have money for the flights so we made tacos. Not exactly an auspicious start to a career in foreign affairs. I joined the Foreign Service, to work in an embassy. I wanted to be somewhere important: Lebanon, Egypt, China. They sent me to Germany, where the language sounds like a cat humping a vacuum cleaner to death. After two years, I left for Harvard, the Kennedy School of Government. I loved it so much I considered taking the normal seven years. I finished in four and a half. It wasn't a record. Then I moved to D.C. three weeks later to be a Middle East advisor. It was the perfect job. My bosses gave me more and more responsibility. Ten-hour days became twelve-hour days became seventeen-hour days became twenty-four-hour days. There was so much to do, to learn, to think. I went a hundred and twenty-nine hours without sleep,

riding global metamorphosis while everyone else was at home with their tiny lives and tiny problems. Which meant no one found me until the next morning.

STEPH

Prozac first, until I got sick of it screwing with my libido. After that I was on CipraleX through my Sophomore year at Brown. It worked great until I got caught hanging myself from the shower rod. I left school and cycled through Luvox, Cipramil, Symbyax. Depression meds all sound like space invaders or cars from the future. I'm on Celexa now, which I'm pretty sure will be the first flying hatchback. It's extended release so I'm still cheerful when I get to work. Brooding bartenders make terrible tips. Plus my psychiatrist is hot. I can tell my dosage isn't affecting my sex drive because I want to rip off his white jacket and mount him on his stupid Freud couch. But he's too professional. My psychiatrist, not Freud. Freud would fuck the shit out of me.

JAMIE

Unipolar mania. That's what they say I have. Which is apparently a disease. But it doesn't feel like a disease, it feels like... falling in love. Your heart races, and your skin tingles. It's perfect. At first. And then... Imagine being in love with two people, at the same time. And your heart is beating fast for the first and faster for the second and your skin is tingling double and both of them take complete focus so your focus grows and stretches. And then another person walks into the room, and another. You're in love twenty times, a hundred times. It builds and builds and your focus bulges and mutates and your heart is ripping out of your body and your skin crackles with burning electricity and it's agony and glory and terror and joy and ... I just wanted to release the energy. I barely even felt it. As I was digging inch-deep trenches in my back. When they found me, my fingernails were filled with chunks of...you get the idea. They're saving my job for me, if I get help. I've proved myself, I have value. I do. I just have to...control it.

SCENE 2

(Steph goes over to the bed and sits on the edge; it becomes a bench in the waiting room of a psychiatrist's office. Jamie enters looking confused and worried. He sees Steph, thinks for a minute and then approaches her.)

JAMIE

Hey can I—...? Sorry. I just... Are these appointments always so...?

STEPH

Empty? Uncomfortable? Kind of how your first girlfriend felt the night you exchanged virginities in the back of your mom's station wagon?

JAMIE

That's not where I was going.

Virgin?
STEPH

Umm, that's not really your business.
JAMIE

Psychopharmacology virgin.
STEPH

Oh. Yea. How could you tell?
JAMIE

Crazy people don't wear Dockers.
STEPH

They don't?
JAMIE

Dockers are for WASPs and anal-retentives.
STEPH

I'm not a WASP.
JAMIE

Well that answers that question.
STEPH

It just seems so... I thought we'd, like, talk more.
JAMIE

And cuddle after? They have 4 clients an hour. Do the math, Dockers.
STEPH

But how are they supposed to understand anything? How can he know what I'm actually experiencing?
JAMIE

His job is to prescribe pills. If you want a hug, go see a therapist.
STEPH

I thought I was.
JAMIE

Wow, you really are a virgin. Did you bleed?
STEPH

What?
JAMIE

Sit down.
STEPH

Okay.

JAMIE

What's your insurance?

STEPH

I don't know.

JAMIE

You don't know your insurance?

STEPH

I have a card.

JAMIE

(He hands her the card.)

STEPH

Damn. This is the Ferrari of insurance plans.

JAMIE

You can tell that from the card?

STEPH

I've spent a lot of time in shrinks' offices.

JAMIE

Really? You don't seem...

STEPH

Don't worry. I have my moments. Long, dark, terrifying moments.

JAMIE

Okay? I'm sorry.

STEPH

Where'd you get the sexy insurance?

JAMIE

I work for the Government.

STEPH

CIA? FBI?

JAMIE

House of Representatives. I analyze socio-political data to contextualize structural shifts.

STEPH

Wow. That's so boring.

JAMIE

It's actually really exciting. There's all sorts of... you don't care, do you?

STEPH

Nope. This should cover a therapist if you want one.

JAMIE

I don't even want to see this guy. I'm not wasting my time with a second person.

STEPH

I'm not gonna force you. Psychiatrists are pretty basic. They hear your problem, give you a few pills and see if it works.

JAMIE

And if it doesn't?

STEPH

You become a homeless prostitute.

(Pause. He looks terrified.)

Damn, you weren't kidding about being anal-retentive.

JAMIE

I didn't say that.

STEPH

If it doesn't work, they try something else until it does. What did they give you?

JAMIE

Three little pieces of paper.

STEPH

No, I mean... here.

(She takes the papers.)

STEPH

Wow.

JAMIE

What?

STEPH

This is... I didn't think you had it in you. Lithium at a full eighteen hundred milligrams, Ziprasidone, short-term Klonopin. You're a psycho.

JAMIE

No, I'm not.

STEPH

That's what I thought. Just another cute anal-retentive with insomnia or some bullshit disease clogging my waiting room. But scripts don't lie. Bipolar?

JAMIE

No. Not really. I mean, I don't think I'm anything, but—... You think I'm cute?

STEPH

Focus, sicko.

JAMIE

I'm not sick. They think... The doctor said it was called unipolar mania.

STEPH

(Shocked and curious)
Unipolar mania? Really?

JAMIE

I guess. Why?

STEPH

It's rare. Like unicorn rare. It's not even recognized by the APA.

JAMIE

The who?

STEPH

The APA. American Psychiatric Association. Wow, do you know anything? There's been a ton of arguments about the existence of mania without depression. A lot of people don't believe it exists, because there's so little documentation.

JAMIE

Doctor Arnold said, he said, "unipolar mania is overlooked as a pathological condition because it rarely presents with damaging manifestations"

STEPH

Did you memorize his explanation?

JAMIE

I didn't mean to. I kinda do it automatically when people talk.

STEPH

You say that like it's not creepy.

JAMIE

Umm. Sorry?

STEPH

What manifestation was so damaging they gave you pills like these?

JAMIE

Thank you. For your help. I should go. I have... Thanks.

STEPH

My pleasure, Dockers.

JAMIE
Can I have my little paper thingies back?

STEPH
One sec.

(She pulls out a pen and writes something on the back of the script.)

JAMIE
What are you doing?

STEPH
Upping your dosage.

JAMIE
What?

STEPH
Calm down. It's my number. So you can ask me out.

JAMIE
I'm gonna ask you out?

STEPH
Probably.

JAMIE
And you'll say?

STEPH
Don't know. Depends if they up my meds.

JAMIE
If they don't, you can have some of mine.

STEPH
And they say chivalry is dead.

SCENE 3

(Steph and Jamie return to the audience.)

JAMIE
I wasn't gonna call her. I know that's rude, but I had enough on my plate and to be honest, she scared me. But without work to distract me, I had nothing to think about.

STEPH

He waited three days. I can be intimidating. But it was fun. I only had to pretend to laugh at his jokes a few times.

JAMIE

She laughed a lot. That was reassuring. And yea, she was terrifying but... I'd only been on the medicine a couple days and it was like being smothered by a pillow. But at dinner I could feel little sparks across my skin again. It felt...normal.

STEPH

We got ice cream on the way home.

JAMIE

Talked about life. Her family.

STEPH

His dreams.

JAMIE

Her cat.

STEPH

Snuffleupagus.

JAMIE

Everything.

STEPH

Except medication.

JAMIE

It was... nice.

STEPH

Eventually he walked me home. Gave me a kiss on the cheek. Nothing else.

JAMIE

(To Steph)

I was being a gentleman.

STEPH

(To Jamie)

The word you're looking for is wuss.

JAMIE

I didn't need to be rushing into something, especially something that meant taking off my shirt.

STEPH

There was something there though. He was sweet, cute, so smart. The manic and the depressive. A pair so perfect they named a disease after us.

JAMIE

She was... special. It sounds stupid to say it, but she was.

STEPH

He called me the next day. Set up another date. He actually had the balls to kiss me on that one.

JAMIE

She was a great kisser.

STEPH

He was fine.

JAMIE

Another date.

STEPH

And another. And another

JAMIE

We went slowly.

STEPH

So slowly I thought my vagina was gonna fall out.

JAMIE

And after a month, there was no way I could avoid it.

STEPH

(To Jamie)

Wow, you know just what to say to make a girl feel special.

JAMIE

No, I wanted to, I did. I was just... We got dinner. Went to her place. It was... amazing.

STEPH

Okay, that I agree with. I knew manic people had a lot of energy, but... Jesus Christ.

JAMIE

After that it was easy. We saw each other almost every night.

STEPH

Only at night though.

JAMIE

Scars blend in better in the dark.

SCENE 4

(Jamie and Steph undress and get in bed. He's wearing a shirt and boxers. She's wearing underwear. Her left arm is out to him.)

STEPH

The horizontal cuts were just self-expression. A social thing.

JAMIE

You must have been so cool.

STEPH

I still am, stupid.

(They kiss.)

JAMIE

And the vertical ones?

STEPH

Vertical means you're trying to die. Opens the vein. Blood flows out faster. Your turn.

JAMIE

Umm, my knee. Here

(He pulls his knee out from under the covers. There's a cluster of light scarring on his left knee.)

JAMIE

Baseball. Sophomore year of high school. JV. High school athletes are seventeen percent more likely to get into a top college.

STEPH

Why do you remember that?

JAMIE

I like numbers.

STEPH

Oh, I thought it would be a stupid reason.

JAMIE

It was the last game of the season. The guy came in to second base, cleats first and I dropped my knee to block him. It was awesome.

STEPH
Ugh. Boys and their sports.

JAMIE
Oh yea, because your scars are so feminine.

STEPH
At least mine are on purpose.

JAMIE
That makes it better?

STEPH
Totally.

(She kisses him.)

STEPH
Wait, I do have one that wasn't on purpose. Here.

(She shows him a scar on the inside of her thigh.)

JAMIE
Yea, I was wondering about that.

STEPH
Teeth.

JAMIE
What?

STEPH
I don't always have the best taste in guys.

JAMIE
A human did that?

STEPH
It's your turn. And you're running out of ways to avoid it.

JAMIE
I'm not avoiding...

STEPH
Turning off the light before coming to bed, grabbing your shirt on the way to the bathroom, holding hands oh so sweetly when we have sex. Was that supposed to be subtle?

JAMIE
I—...

STEPH

I showed you mine, you show me yours. Where did you think this was going?

JAMIE

I didn't. I kinda forget about them. We don't have to do this. Really.

STEPH

I've spent a decade in shrinks' offices, group therapy, two different psych wards. There's nothing I haven't seen.

JAMIE

You might be surprised.

STEPH

Then surprise me. The first person you show is always the hardest. I am the first, aren't I?

JAMIE

The doctor. In the ER.

(She kisses him lightly.)

JAMIE

If you don't want to see me anymore after, just tell me, okay? I'd understand.

STEPH

Will you shut up and get naked?

JAMIE

Okay, I...okay.

(He takes off his shirt, long pause.)

STEPH

Wow. They're... Consider me surprised.

JAMIE

I can...

(He goes to put his shirt back on.)

STEPH

No.

(She kisses his back. Then again. And again.)

JAMIE

Are they... What do they look like?

STEPH

You haven't seen them?

I couldn't. Can't.

JAMIE

They're beautiful.

STEPH

(She speaks to the audience, tracing out the scars as she does.)

STEPH

They were beautiful. Weird, right? But it was like...you could see him there. What he'd done, who he'd been. The struggle to control his brain, to direct it towards a goal, any goal, so it wouldn't turn against him. His failure. How it marked him. The scared little boy desperate to prove himself, telling himself that success would make it go away. It was all there. Pure and fierce and unguarded. It was so beautiful. Ugh, feelings are gross.

ACT 2

SCENE 1

(Steph sits on her bed reading an old chemistry textbook. Her buzzer rings. She looks up, surprised. It rings again. And again. She gets up. It keeps ringing, someone is hitting the botton way too many times. She hits the intercom.)

STEPH

Hello?

JAMIE (O.S.)

What? Oh. Hello? Hello? Steph? It's me. Jamie. It's Jamie.

STEPH

Are you okay?

JAMIE (O.S.)

I'm fine. What are you—...? I'm fine. I was just walking, nearby I was walking, and I saw your apartment and I walked over to your apartment. Apartment is a funny word. Am I not supposed to? Come I mean. Unannounced. Am I—?

STEPH

It's fine. Come up.

(She does her best to clean. The doorbell rings. She answers it and Jamie comes storming in past her.)

Asshole.

JAMIE

It's nice to see you too.

STEPH

Pompous, self righteous, holier-than-thou, condescending uptight asshole.

JAMIE

Are you alright?

STEPH

I'm fine!

JAMIE

Okay.

STEPH

(Pause. He paces the room like a caged tiger.)

JAMIE

I've been good, right? Taking my medicine. Those stupid calming exercises, imagining myself in a field of fucking flowers and rainbows and shit. I've done everything he asked.

STEPH

That's good.

JAMIE

Then what the hell is wrong with him?

STEPH

I can't tell you if I don't know what happened.

JAMIE

I laid out my case, a good case, detailed, reasonable. I didn't even ask to stop. Just lower my dosage to a level that doesn't assume I'm some deranged lunatic bipolar maniac wacko. I mean, Jesus, it's been two months.

STEPH

That's not that long.

JAMIE

It's too long.

STEPH

Your brain has to get acclimated to the medicine.

JAMIE

I can't think. Everything's slow.

STEPH

You don't seem that slow, Jamie.

JAMIE

My brain is mush.

STEPH

I know it can feel that way but that's just a side effect. It'll fade.

JAMIE

That's what he said.

STEPH

Maybe that's because it's right.

JAMIE

No, no, no, no. He didn't say it cuz it's right. He said it cuz he's a hack idiot asshole shitbag hawking snake oil elixirs that don't even help anybody.

STEPH

They help me. If he's just tricking people, what does that make me?

JAMIE

No, that's not... That's not... That's not fair. Stop trying to distract me.

STEPH

I'm trying to help you.

JAMIE

I don't need... Everything's fine. Or it would be, if that stupid— Who pays him?

STEPH

What?

JAMIE

His salary. Where does it come from. Drug companies? I bet he gets a cut. The more he prescribes, the more money he makes. He scratches their back. They scratch his. Everyone makes money and I get screwed. It makes perfect sense.

STEPH

Jamie, that doesn't make perfect sense. It's completely insane.

JAMIE

I am not insane!

(Pause)

STEPH

Jamie.

JAMIE

I'm not.

STEPH

Okay. But when was the last time you took a full breath?

(Pause. He looks at her and realizes how fast he's been going. He takes a breath. He seems calmer.)

JAMIE

I still don't like him.

STEPH

You don't have to. But you do have to trust him. This is hard. It takes time.

JAMIE

I don't have time.

STEPH

Why not? You have plenty of disability leave.

JAMIE

But I'm not disabled.

STEPH

Then enjoy your free vacation. Have fun. Take naps. Watch terrible TV. Play with your girlfriend. Does that sound so bad?

JAMIE

But...

STEPH

Trust the process. It'll get better. You'll get better.

JAMIE

Yea. You're right.

STEPH

And Doctor Arnold is not part of an elaborate conspiracy.

JAMIE

No. He's not smart enough.

(Pause)

STEPH

Not used to admitting you're wrong, are you?

JAMIE

It's fucking annoying.

(She kisses him on the forehead. They sit, content.)

SCENE 2

(Steph steps out of the scene and addresses the audience. Jaime lies on the bed.)

STEPH

I don't think you can believe in an afterlife if you're suicidal. Imagine being a suicidal Christian. Although, I mean, I guess, Jesus was. No, death is merely the end of existence and I can't wait to not exist. It's not a cry for help, or a way of dealing with some setback. It's a carefully considered goal. A permanent solution to a permanent problem. It's not like my existence is doing any good. I waste money, burn carbon, I fill a job that could go to a single mom, or a disabled veteran or a puppy or something. Would the world really be worse off if I just...ceased to be? But suicide can mess you up. Brain damage, hemorrhaging, paralysis. I still want to die, even when I'm relatively happy. I just don't pursue it. It's like a catabolic reaction.

JAMIE

A cat-a-what's-it?

STEPH

Catabolic. Chemical breakdown. It's a standard reaction type.

JAMIE

You're such a geek.

STEPH

I'm a geek? How many presidents have had beards?

JAMIE

That's completely irrelevant. Five. Seven if you count mutton chops.

STEPH

I grew up in a family of chemical imbalances. I probably would've been a chemist if I hadn't dropped out of Brown.

JAMIE

I thought they kicked you out after that guy found you hanging from the shower rod.

STEPH

This is why I hate co-ed bathrooms. A girl would have understood. Anyway, it's like a catabolic reaction. You're catabolizing macromolecules with exergonic bond disassociation but the activation complex requires—

JAMIE

You do realize that you're speaking in tongues right now, right?

STEPH

Sorry, there's a lot of jargon in chemistry.

JAMIE

Jargon? I was expecting a demon to rip through your chest.

STEPH

The point is that you have your normal energy state, being alive, right? And then there's a lower energy state, death, that's better, but in between there's this high energy transition state. There's something bad blocking the way to something good.

JAMIE

So it's like you wanna go downhill but you have to go uphill a bit first.

STEPH

Exactly.

JAMIE

You couldn't have just said that?

STEPH

You're the one who likes learning.

JAMIE

I like learning interesting things.

STEPH

Vietnamese sewage disposal does not count as interesting.

JAMIE

Sewage systems are fundamental to societal development.

STEPH

You're reading a book about poop. Not even American poop. Asian poop.

JAMIE

Are you gonna explain?

STEPH

Are you gonna shut up? So you're in this medium state and you want to get to the lower state, the better state, but there's this...

JAMIE

Hill.

STEPH

You have to get worse before you get better.

JAMIE

You mean, before you get dead.

STEPH

And when you're feeling alright, when you're healthy, when life is good.

JAMIE

When you've just had incredible sex with your boyfriend. Twice.

STEPH

My boyfriend who is going to have a hard time kissing me after I staple his lips together. When life is alright, then it's a big climb to that transition state.

JAMIE

Ha, climb. Hill. I win.

(She smacks him, affectionately.)

STEPH

But as things get worse. When you're depressed, the gap between the normal state and the transition gets smaller and smaller and there's nothing stopping you. The barrier is gone. Like that.

(She snaps her fingers)

Life is just as bad as suicide and suicide gets you to death. It's not even your decision, really, you're just following the only reasonable path. Accepting the inevitable. Does that make sense?

JAMIE

Totally. Except for the obvious problem.

STEPH

What problem?

JAMIE

If it really was inevitable, you wouldn't be so desperate to rationalize it.

SCENE 3

STEPH

No, you can't just... You can't just say something like that.

JAMIE

I can't say I love you?

STEPH

Don't say it again!

JAMIE

It's how I feel.

STEPH

Well, then stop feeling it.

JAMIE

I don't think that's how it works.

STEPH

Jamie, you don't know what you're doing. I'm not...I'm not someone to fall in...that with.

JAMIE

I respectfully disagree.

STEPH

I respectfully think you're a moron.

JAMIE

I respectfully think you're misusing the word respectfully.

STEPH

Just take it back, okay? We'll both forget it ever happened and go back to being normal and not thinking about what any of this means and it'll be great, just great. Do over, perfect.

JAMIE

You're acting crazy.

STEPH

I am crazy, Jamie. Like actually, certifiably crazy. Why would you want to love someone like that? Why would you want to love someone who can barely stand herself?

(Pause)

JAMIE

Do you want it in list form or should I write a poem? I used to be pretty good at limericks.

STEPH

Jamie.

(Pause, he is thinking.)

JAMIE

There once was a girl named Stephanie,
Whose smile was like an epiphany.
She was funny and smart,
With a beautiful heart
And a slight neurotransmitter deficiency.

STEPH

(Smiling, still mad)
You're an idiot.

Possibly.

JAMIE

This is gonna end badly.

STEPH

Why?

JAMIE

Because... I'm a destructive person, Jamie. It's who I am. And that's fine as long as I'm just destroying myself, but destroying you? That would be...

STEPH

Recognizing dangerous behavior is the first step to fixing it.

JAMIE

Yea, I recognize it. So what? I watch myself be irrational and think "what a perfect example of self-defeating behavior." But I still do it. I am one bad day, one bad thought, from spiraling. All the time. And the more I need something, the stronger the compulsion to destroy it. If I admit that I love you, it just gives my brain another thing to sabotage, another thing to use against me while I sit helplessly taking notes on how good I am at hurting myself.

(Pause)

JAMIE

If you admit that you love me? That means...?

STEPH

Is that all you heard?

(Pause)

JAMIE

I feel like saying yes would be a bad idea.

STEPH

Everything about this is a bad idea.

JAMIE

Maybe. Maybe things will be different.

STEPH

Maybe they'll be worse.

JAMIE

But the only way to know is to try. What else can you do?

STEPH

I can stay in control, detached. If I don't let myself feel then I won't screw it up.

JAMIE

But that's exactly what you're doing. You're explaining how you screw up things you care about in the middle of screwing up something you care about.

STEPH

Why? Why would you love me?

JAMIE

Because I can't help it. Because all the reasons in the world mean nothing compared to the way you laugh at my stupid jokes or the smell of your hair or that evil look you make when I wake you up too early. I love you Steph and there's nothing you can do to stop me.

STEPH

I could break you.

JAMIE

You could try.

STEPH

You say that now.

JAMIE

I'm not going anywhere.

STEPH

You don't know what it's like. You think you do, but it's completely...

JAMIE

I'm good at adapting, Steph.

STEPH

What about when things get...?

JAMIE

I'll be here. No matter what happens. I promise. I'll stay.

STEPH

How do you know? How can you know that you can handle... that?

JAMIE

Because I love you.

STEPH

That's a stupid reason.

JAMIE

I'm a stupid person.

(Steph smiles.)

STEPH
You don't actually think that.

JAMIE
But you smiled.

STEPH
This isn't over.

JAMIE
Yes it is. You lost and you know it.

STEPH
I hate you.

JAMIE
And yet I still love you. Maybe I really am stupid.

STEPH
Definitely.

SCENE 4

(They step out to speak to the audience. Their voices are measured, if perhaps strained, at first, but grow towards rage as they progress.)

STEPH
The problem with mental illness is that people don't treat it like an illness.

JAMIE
(Simultaneously)
The problem with mental illness is that people treat it like an illness.

STEPH
An illness is something you have, not something you are. But mental illness? Just look at the language. I'm obsessive-compulsive. I'm ADHD. I'm bi-polar. Nobody ever says I'm cancerous. Nobody sees a plague victim and says "Oh he's just that type of person, he's just a boils and pus type of person." But they see someone suffering from depression and it's, "Oh, he's emo." He's not emo. He's sick.

JAMIE
If we pretend it's an illness we can diagnose people instead of understanding them. Too focused? OCD. Not focused enough? ADD. Skinny? Anorexic. Fat? Compulsive overeater. Maybe he just likes cake. Maybe he doesn't need a diagnosis and pills and therapy. Maybe he needs a diet, or a friend, or for people to let him eat his fucking cake.

(The frustration of people not getting it builds.)

STEPH

The problem is that people think they understand. The number of times I've had someone nod earnestly and tell me they were depressed once. Once? Go to hell. You were sad. Depression is permanent, chemical. Norepinephrine, serotonin, dopamine. You cannot "relate" to misfiring axons, you cannot "understand" hyperactive monoamine transporters. It's like, it's like you're with your plague victim friend again, I don't know why you have a plague victim friend, maybe you're a medieval bar wench. And he's telling you about hemorrhaging blood from oozing pustules, and you nod with that half pitying, half judgmental look and tell him you understand, you once had the chicken pox.

JAMIE

And nobody ever questions whether acting like it's an illness could be exacerbating the problem. Imagine you've been diagnosed bipolar, and you have a bad day. You think, "hmm, am I getting depressed?" Is that thought gonna make you happy? No, it's gonna make you fucking depressed. Then, later, you're excited, energetic. Could that be a manic episode? What if it gets worse? What if you lose control? Oh God, what's gonna happen? Your mind starts racing until you've created an episode out of nothing. If you call your behavior a disease, you give it the power to control you. You turn yourself into a victim.

(Their rage is palpable.)

STEPH

And these people, who think they get it, they're always so helpful. "Why can't you see how beautiful life is?" "Stop feeling sorry for yourself." "You just need to be stronger." Yea, maybe if you weren't so weak you wouldn't have lupus. No, that's illness. Duh. But knowing how easy it would be to slip every time you're cutting vegetables? Weakness. Staring at the road, pretending your brain isn't calculating how fast you'd have to drive into a pillar to be sure that the impact killed you before the flames could? Weakness. Knowing, every second, that you would rather be blinked out of existence and still managing to wash your underwear? Weakness. Weakness. Weakness.

JAMIE

And the more you force people to define themselves as sick, the less free will they have. They're a carrier. Anything they feel, anything they do, even what they did before they were diagnosed, it's just because they're sick. It's not that I worked really hard. It's not that I dedicated my life to something, it's a disease. Because they had one bad night, lost control one time, suddenly their entire life's work is just another symptom. Everything I've done, everything I've fought for, is fucking worthless.

STEPH

When you've survived depression, when you've felt the despair, the disgust, the horror at your own existence that I live with every day, then you can tell me I'm weak.

JAIME

When you've dedicated yourself to something, when you've fought for what you believe in and achieved what they said you couldn't achieve, then you can tell me I'm sick.

BOTH

Until then, you can go fuck yourself.

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