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Cast of Characters

EMILY, age 16

SAM (short for Samantha), age 18

Time

8 o'clock on a Saturday night

Place

The McConnells' basement

FINDING A CHORD

by Catherine Keyser

Play begins

(EMILY sits on the floor in the center of the room; she is a slight girl, unassuming. She always looks as if she is trying to disappear. She attempts to play the guitar on her lap. She plays the opening chords of “Closer to Fine” over and over. Each time she makes a mistake, she starts again at the beginning. Although this must be a frustrating process, EMILY does not get angry. She is extremely persistent. SAM stumbles down the stairs, shouting back up at her mother:)

SAM. You can't control me, you know! Just because I'm here tonight doesn't mean that I actually listen to you.

(EMILY calmly gazes at her sister.)

EMILY. Grounded?

SAM. Shut up.

(SAM fumbles in her pockets and takes out a cigarette and a lighter. She is about to light it.)

EMILY. Sam.

SAM. What?

EMILY. That's stupid. She'll smell it.

SAM. I don't care. Let her smell it.

(SAM flicks the lighter. EMILY keeps watching.)

EMILY. Sam. Mom's asthma.

SAM. *(Flicking the lighter out:)* I don't care about Mom's asthma! You don't think I know about her asthma? I haven't listened to anything else since I was a baby! “I can't do this; I have asthma.” “You can't do this —what about my asthma?”

EMILY. When did Mom ever stop you from doing something because of her asthma?

SAM. Plenty of times. You just don't think about it because you never want to do anything. When you never do anything, Mom can't stop you from doing it.

(Despite her arguments, SAM has put the cigarette away.)

What are you doing home anyway?

EMILY. What do you mean—what am I doing home? I live here.

(EMILY starts playing the chords again.)

SAM. It's a Saturday night.

EMILY. Yeah?

SAM. And you're sitting in our basement!

EMILY. Yeah?

SAM. This doesn't strike you as abnormal?

EMILY. No. Enlighten me.

SAM. Well, believe it or not, Em, this may seem foreign to you, but most teenage girls your age go out on the weekends. You know, like leave the house.

EMILY. I know what going out means, Sam.

SAM. Well, at least you're not stupid.

(EMILY keeps playing the chords.)

What is that?

EMILY. The Indigo Girls.

SAM. Aren't they lesbians?

EMILY. Yes, they're lesbians.

(Beat.)

SAM. What do you do here?

EMILY. Do where?

SAM. At home. Here. On weekends. What do you do?

EMILY. What do you mean, what do I do?

SAM. Well, I mean, you have to entertain yourself somehow. You don't sit around talking to Mom and Dad, do you?

EMILY. Usually, Sam, they have something to do. They do actually go out and watch movies or stuff. Just because you're out doesn't mean they're home.

SAM. Yeah, but you ... you're never out.

EMILY. That's not technically true. I go to school all week.

SAM. Em, school is not out.

EMILY. Then, no, I'm never out.

SAM. But you have friends, don't you?

EMILY. Sam!

SAM. I'm just asking.

EMILY. You sound like a demented guidance counselor.

SAM. It's just, I don't know quite how to deal with this. This being stuck.

EMILY. You're only stuck if you decide to be stuck.

SAM. You sound like a fortune cookie.

EMILY. Fine, don't listen to me. You didn't ask. I won't tell you.

(EMILY continues practicing the opening chords.)

SAM. Don't you know anything besides that?

EMILY. Not yet. *(Singing to herself:)* "I'm trying to tell you something 'bout my life...."

SAM. Would you put that down for a sec?

(EMILY puts it down.)

When was the last time we had a sister-to-sister talk?

EMILY. Sam, I don't think that in the past sixteen years we've ever had a sister to sister talk.

SAM. Well, maybe ... you know, maybe it's time.

EMILY. Time for....

SAM. Time for us to talk.

EMILY. To talk.

SAM. Yeah.

EMILY. Sam, if you're that bored, I'm sure some of your friends have to be home smoking up. I mean, some of your friends have people over to their houses, don't they? You know, the friends without parents.

SAM. My friends have parents. It's not like they're wild animals or something.

EMILY. I never said or thought that they were.

SAM. I don't get you, Em. I try to talk to you for like the first time ever, and you're all mad or something.

EMILY. It strikes me, Sam, that we don't have an awful lot to talk about.

SAM. Well, why don't we talk about why you never go out?

EMILY. Why don't we talk about why you always go out?

SAM. Do you talk to Mom a lot?

EMILY. Wow, subject change.

SAM. No, I'm serious. Do you talk to her?

EMILY. I guess. As much as anybody.

SAM. Cause, you know, I was looking at this woman at dinner tonight, and for the first time ever, I realized that I have absolutely nothing in common with this person. I mean, I've lived in the house with her for my whole life, and I don't know her at all.

EMILY. If it makes you feel any better, I don't think most people know their parents very well.

SAM. No, that doesn't make me feel better. How is that supposed to make me feel better? I don't get what makes me so different from her.

EMILY. You could try talking to her. You are, after all, stuck in the house tonight.

SAM. I am not talking to that woman.

EMILY. And you are seriously wondering why you don't feel like you know her very well?

SAM. Well, what do you know about her?

EMILY. You mean, aside from the obvious? Is married to Richard James McConnell, mother of Samantha Jane and Emily Anne McConnell...

SAM. I don't care about that stuff. You know what I mean. Real stuff.

EMILY. Real stuff.

SAM. Like ... what do you think she was like when she was our age? I mean, she couldn't have always been like this.

EMILY. Like what?

SAM. Well, she's so old.

EMILY. Sam, Mom hasn't even broken fifty yet.

SAM. Well, that's what's weird. She doesn't look that old, but she acts old. She acts like every human instinct she ever had just shriveled up and died.

EMILY. Sam, I'm sure Mom and Dad still have sex.

SAM. Shut up! That's so disgusting.

EMILY. Whatever.

SAM. You definitely spend too much time at home if that's the kind of stuff you think about.

EMILY. I don't actively spend hundreds of hours thinking about it. I just acknowledge it exists.

SAM. Well, it's not like I don't know that sex exists. I just try not thinking about sex and our parents.

EMILY. It seems kind of useless to try not thinking about something. If you try to not thinking about something, that means you really do want to think about it and really are thinking about it; you just can't stand the idea of you thinking about it.

SAM. No. I just try not to think about it. It's real easy. *(SAM groans.)* This is going to be the most boring night.

EMILY. You could go watch T.V. or something. You like to do that, don't you?

SAM. Do you think I'm stupid or something? You think I'm stupid, don't you?

EMILY. No, Sam. I know you're not stupid.

SAM. *(Gentler:)* Why are you always alone down here, Emily?

EMILY. Well, tonight, I'm trying to figure out the guitar.

SAM. That's not what I mean, Emily. You used to hang out with people. You had so many friends around here last summer! Every time I was home, there was somebody here....

EMILY. You weren't home that much, Sam.

SAM. Still! And then, this year, there's just nobody. I mean, I never see anybody over here. Is there ever anybody over here?

EMILY. Well, I mean, there are people who live here, Sam. I live here.

SAM. Why do you hate me so much, Em? I'm just trying to talk. Can't we just talk?

EMILY. I think we're talking.

SAM. We're not talking. I'm talking.

EMILY. Okay, okay. So, if you want to talk, what do you want to talk about?

(Beat.)

SAM. I don't know, I guess I just thought....

EMILY. Sam, I really appreciate your trying to talk to me. I wish that Mom hadn't grounded you so that you could have gone out

tonight. I'm sorry that there's nothing I can do about that. But you don't have to talk to me. I mean, no one has to talk to me. I'm not lonely. It may look like I'm lonely, but I'm really not. I don't need you to sit here and try and figure out what's wrong with me.

SAM. Hasn't Mom talked to you at all about this? Have you told her what's wrong?

EMILY. Mom and I don't interfere in each other's lives, Sam. I mean, we get along, but we don't ask questions.

SAM. But that's exactly what I've been talking about! That is so wrong. You're her daughter!

EMILY. So are you. You never talk to her!

SAM. She doesn't listen, Emily. I know what I want, and she doesn't care about what I want.

EMILY. Well, you're going to be out of here in another three months. It shouldn't be too hard to escape and find whatever it is that you think you want.

SAM. But you know, when I come home, they're going to be total strangers. I don't want them to be total strangers. I want them to know who I am.

EMILY. Who are you, Sam?

SAM. Well, I'm not exactly sure yet. But I know that I'm going to find it out.

EMILY. How do you know that? How does anybody ever know that?

SAM. Well, that's just the way it happens, I guess.

EMILY. (*Bitterly:*) I guess.

SAM. Why? Don't you know who you are?

EMILY. I know it better than anybody else does, that's for sure. But that's not much.

SAM. See, Em? You seem so sad. I don't understand what you've got to be so sad about. You're sixteen years old; I loved being sixteen years old. It was one of the best years ever.

EMILY. Sweet sixteen and never been....

(EMILY smiles.)

SAM. Have you ever had a boyfriend, Em?

EMILY. Sam, I....

SAM. You did, didn't you? That boy last summer. The quiet one with the red hair.

EMILY. Jamie.

SAM. He was your boyfriend, wasn't he?

(EMILY resumes playing the guitar.)

Was it a bad break-up?

(EMILY laughs shortly.)

EMILY. I don't know what you would call bad. He doesn't really want to talk to me now, and I don't blame him.

SAM. Why, did you cheat on him or something?

EMILY. No.

SAM. Then, what is it? What could be so horrible?

EMILY. I don't want to talk about this, Sam. I appreciate your interest, but....

SAM. Talk to me, Emily. Is that why you don't hang out with anybody anymore? Did you get in a fight with your friends over this guy?

EMILY. I can tell you safely, Sam, that this is really something that you don't want to get yourself involved in. Trust me, I'm fine. I've made ... a choice when it comes to my social life. This way is just easier. Trust me. It's much, much easier.

SAM. Easier than what? Easier than going into a nunnery?

EMILY. I was actually really considering becoming a Trappist monk.

SAM. Em, this isn't funny. This matters to me. I'm your older sister.

EMILY. That's never mattered to you before.

SAM. It never hasn't mattered to me. I just haven't been around that much. You've got to understand, it's a rebellion thing. Everyone goes through it. You will too.

EMILY. Sometime between now and my senior year? I don't think so. I'll just adolescently angst quietly, thank you very much.

SAM. I hate it when you do that.

EMILY. Do what?

SAM. You think you're so smart, Em. What makes you think you're so smart?

EMILY. I'm not smart, Sam. Trust me.

SAM. Could've fooled me. You always act like you know exactly what's going on, and I have no clue.

EMILY. I'm just answering the questions you're asking. Just because I know the answers doesn't make me a smart person.

SAM. You know, I really don't think we have anything in common. Is that possible?

EMILY. It's genetically unlikely, but I'm sure it's not impossible.

(EMILY returns to working on the chords of "Closer To Fine.")

SAM. I don't think you're honest with yourself.

(EMILY looks at her and stops playing.)

EMILY. Sam, stop trying.

SAM. What do you mean "Stop trying"? My younger sister is giving up on life, and you want me to stop trying? Isn't it enough that mom has stopped trying?

EMILY. Don't be melodramatic.

SAM. There it is again. That know-it-all sound in your voice.

EMILY. Would you rather I didn't talk, Sam? I thought the whole point was you didn't think I was talking enough.

SAM. You still aren't talking to me. You're talking down to me. But you're not better than me just because you're Mommy's little angel.

EMILY. What the hell do you mean by that?

SAM. She thinks you're perfect, Emily. Just because you sit around here like a loser.

EMILY. She does not think I'm perfect, Sam. You really aren't around here enough.

SAM. That's why she likes you. You're the perfect member of the family. I'm just the juvenile delinquent.

EMILY. What do you expect me to say to that? Do you want me to start singing "Officer Krupke"?

SAM. What's that?

EMILY. Never mind.

(EMILY plays chords again.)

SAM. So, it doesn't even bother you that it's so unfair.

EMILY. What's so unfair?

SAM. Them liking you better than me. It isn't fair.

EMILY. They don't like me better than they like you.

SAM. Well, they sure hate me. I don't know what they think of you, but they hate me.

EMILY. How can you know if they hate you? You just said that you never talk to them.

SAM. Do you know the kind of looks that those people give me?

EMILY. Those people! Sam, they're our parents.

SAM. So? That doesn't make them part of us.

EMILY. Technically, it does, Sam. It makes them our family.

SAM. They're not my family. You know, I don't think I've ever seen a family.

EMILY. Sam. Can't you just stop this? It isn't helping?

SAM. I used to always watch those stupid shows on Nick at Nite when I was a little kid. You know, like Ozzie and Harriet....

EMILY. You want our parents to be Ozzie and Harriet?

SAM. Not, but like, their kids talked to them. We don't talk to them. How could we talk to them?

EMILY. I can't believe that you wish our life was like Ozzie and Harriet.

SAM. Jesus, Em! You're acting like I'm not on your side.

EMILY. What side? I don't think there are sides, Sam. You're just pissed off because you don't want to sit here all night. And I'm sorry for that! I don't know what I'm supposed to do about that. Will you tell me?

SAM. I just wanted you to talk to me. I want to be your friend.

EMILY. Trust me, Sam. You don't want to be my friend.

SAM. Why, what's so bad about you that I wouldn't want to be friends with you? You are my sister.

EMILY. You said before—we have nothing in common.

SAM. Maybe we do. Maybe we just don't know yet.

EMILY. Sam, I think we should just let this bonding stuff go now. I really appreciate it, but I don't want to be your project.

SAM. You're not my project. Christ, you're perfect the way you are! I just don't understand why you don't enjoy that.

EMILY. I'm not perfect, Sam.

SAM. Well, what's wrong with you? If you don't like yourself, why don't you tell me what's wrong with you?

EMILY. I never said I didn't like myself.

SAM. Tell me why you're not perfect anyway. I don't understand.

EMILY. Stop it, Sam.

SAM. No, I'm not going to stop it. You make me so mad! You've had all the advantages, and you don't do jack! Look, I'm the screw-

up in this family. There's only enough room for one. So, why are you sitting at home on a Saturday night?

EMILY. What makes you think that you're the screw-up, Sam? Mom and Dad don't think you're the screw-up.

SAM. Oh, don't they? Then, why am I sitting down here tonight? Why aren't I out with my friends?

EMILY. Well, they still have to be parents, Sam. They have to do stuff like this because that's their job. That doesn't mean they're not proud of you.

SAM. What would they be proud of me for? I don't do anything. You're the one always on high honor roll, bringing back those great grades. I'm the one who gets smashed and smokes up on weekends.

EMILY. You don't think they did that when they were teenagers?

SAM. They don't remember what it was like to be our age.

EMILY. They're not stupid, Sam. They're only parents. They know what it was like. They just can't treat you like it's okay. That's not their position in your life.

SAM. They were probably like you. They probably studied all the time and then learned how to play the guitar on Saturday nights.

EMILY. Trust me, Sam. They weren't like me. No one is like me.

SAM. Emily, there have to be people like you. The word "overachiever" wasn't invented just for you.

EMILY. No, there aren't people like me. No one spends their time sitting in their basement because they're too scared to leave. No one doesn't have any friends because they hate the idea of anyone knowing them for who they are.

SAM. Now who's being melodramatic? Why in hell would you be scared to leave the basement?

EMILY. It's not like I can't leave. It's just, I don't want to. It's so much easier.

SAM. What are you talking about, Emily? You sound like bad movie dialogue.

EMILY. Maybe I do. Maybe I'm just being too emotional about everything. Let's just forget about it! When's the last time anyone cared?

SAM. Don't whine at me like that. I've been sitting down here trying to get you to talk to me for the last twenty minutes.

EMILY. Not because you care about who I am. You just want to change me, like Mom and Dad. You wonder why I don't go out, you wonder why I'm not just like you. Well, I apologize. I'm sorry I can't be like you. I can't be like anyone else. But I have to live with that. I don't see how it's you who is suffering.

SAM. Well, you're treating me like I'm some sort of idiot, Emily. You're talking so that I won't be able to understand. You just want me to leave when all I'm trying to do is to reach you.

EMILY. Don't reach me. No one reaches me. I don't want to be reached.

SAM. Well, that's retarded! I don't think that anyone should just live in their own little world.

EMILY. I think it's just fine to live in my own little world. I don't want to be the person that you want me to be.

SAM. Who do I want you to be? I never thought I wanted you to be anyone but yourself!

EMILY. That's because you don't know who I am. If you knew who I was, you would never want me to be myself.

SAM. Wait! Wait! I read a poem about this!

EMILY. About quiet desperation? It's Thoreau, Sam. It's part of the sophomore year curriculum.

SAM. No, not that one. I never liked him. I always thought it was kind of stupid that he hid in the woods just to avoid paying his taxes. Why couldn't he just pay them like everybody else?

EMILY. I don't think most people who read Thoreau worry about that, Sam.

SAM. No, but really ... I read some poetry for fun....

EMILY. Amazing.

SAM. Shut up! This is important.

EMILY. (*Genuine:*) I'm sorry.

SAM. I read this stuff because part of it was quoted at the beginning of this play my friend was in ... I wish I could remember....

EMILY. I'm sure it'll come to you eventually.

(EMILY resumes trying to play the chords. After a moment, SAM remembers excitedly:)

SAM. Langston! The guy's name was Langston.

EMILY. Langston Hughes?

SAM. Yeah, 'cuz Darren was in Raisin In the Sun, and there was this whole poem about dreams....

EMILY. The “whatever happens to a dream deferred” poem?

SAM. Yeah, that one. And I always thought it would explode. But you're like the raisin.

EMILY. I'm like a raisin.

SAM. Yeah, you're getting all crusty instead of doing anything about the dream.

EMILY. At least raisins are healthy.

SAM. Yeah, but they're gooky. And who the hell wants to be a raisin? You wouldn't even get to be one of those singing raisins. Just a boring old crusted over raisin.

EMILY. I'm glad you think that my life is so interesting, Sam.

SAM. All I'm saying is that you shouldn't want to be a raisin. If you do, you'll grow up and be like ... well, like them.

(SAM gestures upstairs.)

EMILY. I think our parents are happy.

SAM. How could they be happy? All they do is sit at home, or go out to the movies....

EMILY. I like the movies.

SAM. Yeah, but only some movies. Other movies are really stupid. I'd much rather ... I don't know. Wreck a car. Drive to Atlantic City and come back at dawn. Cool stuff that they don't want us to do.

EMILY. But you never will. You know that you'll never do that one drastic thing to push Mom and Dad over the edge.

SAM. No, Em. That's what's so cool. I don't know that. You know? Tomorrow I could just leave and never come back.

EMILY. They would call the cops and bring you back. Or you would be raped and murdered.

SAM. But that's like them talking. Why does everything fun have to be bad?

EMILY. It's not like being in a novel, Sam. Real people don't survive just because they're the protagonists. In real life, sometimes eighteen year old girls just get raped and murdered, and no one finds the bad guy.

SAM. Way to be cheerful, Em.

EMILY. I'm just explaining that things don't work the way you said. It's not like, just because you want it to happen, good adventures will happen when you do something drastic. It's not like a pirate movie. We aren't the Goonies.

SAM. There's no point settling for a stupid boring life and getting old.

EMILY. Everyone gets older, Sam. It's chronology.

SAM. Yeah, but we don't have to be raisins. Some people grow up and become rock stars.

EMILY. Yeah, and a lot more people grow up to be cops or accountants or investment bankers. It's not like we choose everything about our lives.

SAM. I can get what I want in life. You'll see.

EMILY. That's such bullshit.

SAM. You just don't have the guts to take control. You've gotta just sit here with Mommy and Daddy until college. That's so useless, Em! It's no wonder you don't have any fun.

EMILY. It's not that I don't want to, Sam. It's that I can't. That's not the way things work. Trust me, I know.

SAM. You're old too.

EMILY. What?

SAM. You act like an old person. Sometimes I think when I get near you, you're going to smell like dead flowers and Grandma's perfume. You don't do anything.

EMILY. It's not that I don't believe in adventure, Sam. It's that I don't believe in happy endings.

SAM. It's no wonder that no one wants to hang out with you. You just sit home alone, playing guitar and thinking about how much life sucks.

EMILY. Sam, I don't think that life sucks. Trust me, I love being alive. I just don't have this need to fight against reality.

SAM. I'm not crazy, Emily.

EMILY. I'm not trying to say that you're crazy. In fact, I'm like ... Well, I'm proud of you.

SAM. Proud of me?

EMILY. Yeah. You aren't scared of anything, Sam. You really believe you can change everything.

SAM. No, Em. I'm just talking. I'm not really gonna do anything. You're the one with all the brains in the family. Mom and Dad are always saying you're gonna change the world. With those grades of yours—

EMILY. No, but see, I can't. I never will. I don't think it can be done. But as long as you believe in it, you can do things with your life.

SAM. (*Laughing nervously:*) What about you? It's not like you're not gonna have a life, Em. Even if you are a loser now.

EMILY. I don't think I can, Sam. I can't be ... I can't be honest with people. If the world could accept me for who I am, then maybe....

SAM. You're just like anybody else; you could hang out if you wanted to.

EMILY. Sam, I appreciate your interest. Honest to God, I do. But this is something I've thought a lot about. This is something that only I can deal with.

SAM. Wait a minute ... what are we talking about here? What do you have to deal with? Does this have to do with that guy? Look, I've dated so many guys, it's not even funny, and you just can't take that kind of stuff seriously.

EMILY. *(Laughing:)* No, Sam. This is not about Jamie.

SAM. Your first break-up is tough, Em, but then ... you know, you just get over them.

EMILY. I'm over it. Trust me, I'm over it.

SAM. Then what is it? *(A beat.)* You know, sometimes it can get pretty lonely being alone in this stupid family. Sometimes I really just wish that I had a sister. Like a sister I could talk to.

(EMILY gives SAM a weird look.)

EMILY. You so are making that up.

SAM. I am not! Christ, I don't want to make it sound like the Brady Bunch or anything.

(SAM takes out a cigarette.)

Do you want one?

EMILY. I don't smoke. Besides—

SAM. I know, I know. Mom's asthma.

(SAM lights it and starts smoking.)

Let her throw a fit. Who cares? She's the one who locked me in the house tonight anyway.

(EMILY starts giggling.)

EMILY. This is so stupid.

(SAM starts laughing too.)

SAM. I know, isn't it? Sometimes, I feel like I do way too much to get a rise out of her. I mean ... that's not really why I do everything I do, but sometimes it feels that way.

EMILY. I know.

(Both girls stare up the stairs.)

SAM. She hasn't started screaming yet.

EMILY. Maybe she went upstairs to watch the news.

SAM. I'd feel so stupid if like the smoke alarm went off or something. Do we have a smoke alarm in here?

EMILY. I don't even know. I never really worry about fires.

SAM. You just worry about getting raped and murdered.

EMILY. I don't worry about it. I don't worry about anything really. I just know that bad things happen. I'm a realist.

SAM. You're not a realist. You're a sixteen-year-old weirdo. You so don't belong here. You really should be sitting in some cafe in Paris or something, strumming out some song on that guitar, stoned out of your mind—

EMILY. I don't do drugs.

SAM. Well, you should. It would mellow you out. You need to start having more fun.

EMILY. I have fun. It just doesn't show.

SAM. Well, what's the point of that? Secret fun doesn't sound like fun at all to me.

(EMILY laughs.)

What's so funny about that?

EMILY. Secrets are the most fun, Sam. Didn't you know?

SAM. You'd better think they're fun. You have enough of them.

EMILY. It's not like I'm trying to have secrets, Sam. There are just so many things that people don't want to know.

SAM. That's completely untrue. I would love to know—

EMILY. Not just you. It's like ... what you were saying before about Mom and Dad not knowing who you are. How it's ... alienating. Imagine if that was the whole world. And you just couldn't relate. It's like ... you're standing behind this enormous cellophane wall, and because it's cellophane, you can like reach out, and it feels like you're touching something, but really, everything under your fingers is plastic. It's not real.

SAM. You sound like in that movie, the boy in the bubble. That was such a cheesy movie.

EMILY. I am the boy in the bubble.

(SAM stares at her sister, realizing the seriousness and depression in these words. EMILY is nervous now, feeling like she has said too much. She tries to make a joke:)

But at least that makes me John Travolta, and he's really popular again, isn't he? Maybe soon I'll make it out of the bubble and into pulp fiction.

SAM. This is really bad, Em.

EMILY. *(Pretending SAM is talking about the guitar:)* Yeah, I know. I really need to learn these chords and get on with the rest of the song. But it's not easy without lessons or anything, you know—

SAM. Not the song. I don't care about the song.

(SAM grabs the guitar.)

EMILY. Sam, I—

(SAM puts the guitar down where Emily can't reach it, on the other side of her. SAM stares her sister in the eye.)

SAM. Now talk to me.

EMILY. Sam, I can't—

SAM. Talk to me. God stuck me in this house tonight for a reason, and I am going to get you to tell me what's wrong.

EMILY. You're on a mission from God?

SAM. Shut up. You know what I mean. I just meant, like, things happen for a reason, and I'm here tonight for a reason. I'm going to talk you out of this.

EMILY. Trust me, this is not something you can “talk me out of.”

SAM. You're all strung out, and I don't know why. This can't be good for you.

EMILY. It may not be healthy, but it's who I am.

SAM. You're one walking gloom cloud?

EMILY. I'm happy, Sam!

SAM. You sure don't look it. You don't sound it either.

EMILY. I don't walk around like one of those girls at school who wears Gap outfits and ponytails and smiles all the time because she's got a great boyfriend and thinks her life is perfect. I don't smile all the time.

SAM. Try at all.

EMILY. But I'm happy. I read this book, the Tao Te Ching—

SAM. Sounds sketchy to me.

EMILY. And it says stuff like, you just have to let go and follow the Way.

SAM. The Way? What Way?

EMILY. Well, like this guy, Lao Tsu, thought it meant God's path or like divine grace, but I think you can find the Way like within your self.

SAM. So, you think you've found the Way?

EMILY. Well, I'm not there yet. I haven't totally let go and just allowed myself to be yet. But I'll get there. I have to just accept who I am and then accept that I don't fit in the world the way things are right now. But that's okay because people who don't understand me are just excess baggage.

SAM. You're nuts.

EMILY. Think so if you want. But it helps me through everything.

SAM. What's everything? What's so incredibly hard about your life? I could show you hard. Just look at my life.

EMILY. Yeah, exactly. You act like everything in your life is some grand rebellion. Why can't I think my life is important too?

SAM. Why are you so pissed off all the time? It's bad to be mad so much.

EMILY. I can't believe I'm hearing you say this.

SAM. When it looks like I'm mad, Em, I'm really just ... well, I'm frustrated.

EMILY. Don't explain, I—

SAM. No, I should. Because here I am, telling you to be all perky or whatever ... *(Beat.)* I know I'm not really smart or anything. And I can't fix anything for you. I don't have any answers. I just know you're really special. I mean, Christ, you're like brilliant, and you've always done everything right. They've always thought that you do everything right.

EMILY. No, they don't.

SAM. Yes, they do. Mom and Dad have always been prouder of you than they are of me. Because they know, you know? That you like can't help doing something really special with all the talents that you have. And you're so patient! I could never be that patient. I'm always fighting, you know? I'm going this way, then that, and I don't ever really know where I'm going. Like these cigarettes. Why the hell am I smoking a cigarette in my parents' basement? It's not making a real statement or anything. Even if she notices, what important thing am I saying by that? Nothing!

EMILY. Sam—

SAM. No, but you've always had stuff to say, Em. Remember when you won that essay contest?

EMILY. Sam!

SAM. No, really. In like the sixth grade. It was on like tree conservation or something.

EMILY. Recycling. It was on recycling.

SAM. Yeah, and I was in eighth grade, right, and I'm supposed to be all special cause I'm older or whatever. And I read this essay that my kid sister wrote, and you were using words I'd never even heard of, and it really meant something, you know?

EMILY. I didn't know what I was saying, Sam.

SAM. That's not true. You've always known what you were saying. That's why it's so hard to be around you sometimes. It's like ... I have all these things that I want to say, and I want to have them make sense, but they just come out like I'm being angry and stupid.

EMILY. Sam, you are not angry and stupid.

SAM. But you say things, and they're like dreams. They're like these beautiful perfect dreams, and if you just listen to them the right way, they can tell you so much about everything.

EMILY. Yeah, but I can't let anyone listen anymore, Sam. They might find out things that I don't want them to find out.

SAM. Yeah, like that you're a beautiful and amazing person.

EMILY. No, like I'm gay.

(Beat.)

SAM. You're what?

EMILY. *(Walking past SAM and picking up her guitar:)* You heard what I said.

SAM. You mean “gay” like “retarded” right? You mean like, “I'm a dork; I'm so gay” or whatever?

EMILY. Forget it.

SAM. So you didn't mean like “I'm a dork”?

EMILY. *(Laughing bitterly:)* Well, that too.

(EMILY starts playing the chords again.)

SAM. Yeah, but like, you're so young. I mean, when I was younger, I used to think that my friends were pretty and stuff, but I wasn't gay or anything. It's just how things are when you're ... younger.

EMILY. Sam, this isn't because I'm younger. I'm sixteen. I'm attracted to girls. No one can know. That's it.

SAM. So I'm the only one who knows this.

(EMILY is silent.)

Em?

EMILY. Jamie knows.

SAM. You told your boyfriend that you're gay?

(EMILY is silent.)

Well, no wonder he doesn't talk to you! Weirdo.

EMILY. Sam!

SAM. I didn't mean it that way. That came out wrong. I just meant ... Well, I mean. You kind of feel stupid if you're a guy and you find out the chick that you're dating doesn't like you 'cause she really likes girls.

EMILY. I didn't mean to tell him. He was just ... you know, he was such a nice guy, and I thought ... well, I thought it wouldn't be important if I could just pretend. Like playing a part. If I acted like everyone else, I would be everyone else.

SAM. That doesn't work. Trust me, I know that doesn't work.

EMILY. Well, me too, now. It was really ... well, it was really embarrassing. I kept trying to pretend that everything was okay, and I think he really thought it was. I mean, as far as his end was concerned, everything was fine, but me ... there was just nothing. I thought he was a good friend, but....

SAM. So, you just told him? I just wouldn't know what to say. How could you tell him?

EMILY. Well, I didn't really want to believe it. I didn't even let myself think it really. I mean, I didn't even think about the word "lesbian" being like ... who I am until I said it. We were drinking at his house one night with a whole bunch of friends, and just all of a sudden, it felt like I had this storm inside, and I just had to let it out.

There was no way that all of that thunder and lightning was going to stay out of the way, so it just sort of burst.

SAM. You just stood up in a party and said: “Hey, everybody, I’m a dyke! Love me and accept me! I’m cool!”

EMILY. No. I wasn’t that far gone. I was drunk enough to feel like I had to say it, but no matter how drunk you are, you still know that the fact that you’re gay is not something you want everyone to hear. It’s certainly not something that you want to get back to you parents. So ... I told Jamie I needed to talk to him ... and I pulled him into the next room and...

SAM. Told him you were gay?

EMILY. Told him that I had a crush on his older sister.

SAM. That was harsh.

EMILY. It was better than: “I’m a lesbian—protect your friends and family from the alien invader.”

SAM. Only slightly. “Hi, I just wanna let you know I’d rather kiss your sister than you!” He must’ve died.

EMILY. This wasn’t easy, Sam!! I didn’t like plan it.

SAM. I’m sorry. I just don’t know what to say.

EMILY. So much for being proud of me, right? No more “you’re a beautiful and special person”!

SAM. That’s not fair!

EMILY. Isn’t it?

SAM. Emily, you’re so picky! I haven’t had time to buy my “Gay is Beautiful, Build a Rainbow” tee-shirt yet, I’m sorry. I don’t know what to say.

EMILY. That’s why I can’t tell anyone. People don’t understand. Jamie made me leave his house. His friends don’t talk to me either. I don’t know what he told people, but I don’t think that most people know. I think he was embarrassed. I felt bad. I didn’t mean to hurt him.

SAM. Well, he was a jerk for kicking you out of his house. What a coward!

EMILY. (*Laughing:*) Just a minute ago, you were talking about how much you understood his point of view!

SAM. Yeah, but it's so typical of a guy, you know? I mean, he should have cared about you no matter what. I mean, he cared about you when you were his girlfriend, right?

EMILY. Yeah, but I'd just told him that everything was a lie. I mean, do you know what that's like, Sam? To realize that absolutely everything in your life is a lie? I have to understand that, 'cuz that's what happened to me. I didn't realize until then just how much of a sham everything was.

SAM. Life doesn't suck just because you're a lesbian. God, it feels so weird to use that word about my sister! I mean, you don't even know you really are a lesbian.

EMILY. No, Sam. You don't understand. I know in my heart that I'm a lesbian. I wasn't sure of it until I got older, but even when I was a kid ... This is part of who I am. It's not something I'm proud of. It's why I have to be alone.

SAM. So, you're gay. Lots of people are gay. They don't like all sit by themselves in basements and play guitar.

EMILY. Life isn't liberated, Sam. You may think it's fine for me to be gay; you may not. Whatever. It doesn't matter. Mom and Dad would kill themselves—

SAM. So? Mom's asthma wouldn't bother her anymore. We'd be free, for Chrissakes.

EMILY. You don't think Mom and Dad are happy. I think Mom and Dad are happy. And I think they really care about us. I don't want to destroy everything they've based their lives on.

SAM. Come on, Em. This is who you are!

EMILY. Who I am doesn't matter. As long as I can deal with it, it's okay.

SAM. You're not dealing with it! You're sitting in a basement.

THIS PLAY IS NOT OVER!

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