

Finding “Normal”

Prologue

Lights up, the stage is bare. There is a scrim upstage with a projector. Dee, a Deaf adult is standing center stage, she seems a bit uncomfortable in front of the large crowd, but signs with confidence and smiles as she addresses the audience.

Dee: *(signed and projected on the screen)* Hi, welcome *(looking around at audience)*. So, I guess you're all here to learn a little bit more about me and my culture. Well, as you might've figured out I'm deaf. And, well, Deaf. I'm part of a culture that values our unique language and traditions. And because these are different from yours, I thought it would be a great opportunity to share my story. Some of this story will be told by my family and friends and others parts will be shared from the perspective of teachers and educators who have influenced me along the way. But as this story unfolds, I'll be right here *(gestures to stage left and projection)* sharing my perspective. You'll get to see the many aspects of my identity and how the perspectives of others changed and shaped who I am. You'll see how these perceptions don't always align, but that's why I'm sharing my story—so you can see my side along with society's side, which together might give a more complete picture. So, to start this story, we have to go back a little—to the year when I was just turning 3 years old. Here we go...

Dee crosses to stage left, where she will remain for most of the scenes. A special is on her.

Scene 1a

(Dee has moved staged left, now at center stage is Dee's living room. Her parents [Ma and Pa] are seated on the couch, while younger Dee about age 3 sits on the floor, playing with a doll)

(Ma opens a pamphlet that they received from the pediatrician; on the projector an image on the cover appears “Warning Signs of Childhood Hearing Loss”)

Loudspeaker/Voice of Doctor: Signs in Babies—Does not startle at loud noises. Does not turn to source of a sound. Seems to hear some noises but not others. Signs in Children—Speech is delayed. Speech is not clear. Does not follow directions. Often says “huh?” Turns the TV volume up too high. ¹

Voice of Doctor *(continuing to read the pamphlet)*: 1 out of 4 cases of hearing loss is due to maternal infections during pregnancy, complications after birth, and head trauma. For example, the child: was exposed to infection before birth, spent 5 days or more in a hospital NICU, needed a special procedure like a blood transfusion, had an infection around the brain and spinal cord meningitis, received a bad injury to the head that required a hospital stay. ¹

¹ Taken from Center for Disease Control and Prevention, *Hearing Loss in Children*

Ma (*to Pa*): Do you think that...?

Pa: Well, there was that virus she had last winter...

Ma (*to Dee, softly then getting louder*): Dee, come here, Dee, come over to Mama.

The child doesn't flinch, Ma tries again.

Ma (*increasingly concerned, almost panicked*): Dee, hi Dee, over here, Dee, Dee.

Pa: What else does this say? What are we supposed to do?

Pa takes the pamphlet from Ma.

Pa (*continues to read*): Get Help! If you think your child might have a hearing loss, ask the child's doctor for a hearing screening as soon as possible. Don't wait! If your child does not pass a hearing screening, ask the child's doctor for a full hearing test as soon as possible. If your child has a hearing loss, talk to the child's doctor about treatment and intervention services...The earlier children with hearing loss start getting services, the more likely they are to reach their full potential.²

Ma goes over to pick up Dee, brings her to the couch.

Ma: Well, I guess we should make that phone call.

Pa: I'll grab the phone.

Scene ends with Dee on her mother's lap, it's a somber moment for the family.

Scene 1b—Dee's Perspective

Lights up on Dee, on stage left, she signs this short monologue

Dee: To be honest at that age, I didn't really know what was going on. I loved to play and to run, but at some point I began to see the concern in my parents' faces. They didn't seem happy or excited anymore. Little did I know, after this day I would spend the next several weeks encountering countless doctors, audiologists, teachers, educators, and other family—all of whom would have their own opinion about my life and my experience.

² Also, taken from Center for Disease Control and Prevention, *Hearing Loss in Children* <http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/hearingloss/facts.html>

Scene 2

The scene has shifted to the arrangement of an audiologist's office. The couch is turned at an angle; Dee's parents remain seated. Young Dee continues to play on the floor. A chair is placed stage left of the couch and an audiologist sits across from Dee's parents.

Audiologist: So from what we've seen today in the play audiometry testing, it seems likely that Dee has some sort of hearing loss. Looking at her case history, I'd say it's caused by that infection of viral meningitis. I know it was a few months ago but it often takes a couple of months to understand the lasting effects.

Pa: I thought the anti-virals and the hospitalization were supposed to treat the infection. She was released after a week. The doctors said she was fine.

Ma: Can she take more of the medication to help?

Aud: Well, yes, she is fine. The infection has cleared, she's healthy. But the virus has permanently damaged her hearing in some way. We need to do some more specific testing to get a better idea of the situation.

Ma: What do we need to do?

Aud: Well, first, we'll want to do an ABR. So that'll need to be scheduled for some time this week. Then we'll follow up with other audiologists and a few SLPs, you'll need to think about educational choices—ASL? Total communication? Auditory-oral schools?

Ma (*quizzically*): Wait, what does all of this mean? What does that even mean? A..B..R? SLP?

Audiologist: ABR stands for auditory brainstem response. It measures the brain's responses to sounds, by placing electrodes behind the ear and on the top of the skull. The output shows different waves; each wave represents neurological activity at one or more generating sites along the auditory brainstem path.³

Ma: What will that test tell you?

Aud: We can interpret the output to determine the threshold of hearing.

Pa (*quickly adding his input*): Is it invasive?

Aud: Not at all. It's entirely painless. Dee can be awake or asleep. And we'll be able to interpret the results in just a matter of minutes.

³ Adapted from *Introduction to Audiology* (10th Edition) by Fredrick N. Martin and John Greer Clark, pp. 188-192

Ma: So what other things should we be thinking about?

Aud: Well, you're going to want to consider the different educational options.

Pa (*almost interrupting*): What do you mean by **different**?

Ma (*overlapping Pa*): She's not even in kindergarten yet.

Aud: Dee has some substantial hearing loss and that's going to impact her academically. It's also going to affect her language and speech. You're going to want to start considering these options sooner rather than later.

Ma: So, what are the options?

Aud: Well...*(She opens her desk drawer and proceeds to pull out a handful of slightly outdated pamphlets, they are covered with Word Art and colorful images of school children. As she speaks to Ma and Pa, she hands over the pamphlets one at a time, giving a glossed over description of each one. As Ma receives each new brochure, the content of it is projected on to the screen. With each passing explanation, the overwhelming confusion inches across the faces of Ma and Pa.)*

Aud (*continuing*): First, here's a "Decision Guide to Communication Choices."⁴ It's a helpful worksheet you can fill in while considering the options available. *(Aud hands over this grid-filled document and promptly begins to explain the next pamphlet).*

Ma (*softly*): So what are the options?

As these options are spoken about, brief descriptions appear on the projector. They are added one by one and soon cover the entire screen.

Aud (*overlapping Ma*): Towards the end of this document⁵, it explains the five educational programs available. One option is the auditory-oral approach, which uses technology to boost residual hearing in order to teach spoken language. It also involves using speech or lip reading. The second option is the auditory-verbal approach, which also relies on technology to develop spoken language, but does not allow for speech reading. *(At this point, Ma and Pa are clearly overwhelmed by this information and are struggling to follow along. They simply nod their heads.)* Another approach is the Bi-Bi; it uses ASL and the family's native language to encourage a

⁴ Centers of Disease Control and Prevention "Hearing Loss in Children" Resources (<http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/hearingloss/freematerials/commdecisionguide3508.pdf>)

⁵ Early Intervention: Communication and Language Services for Families of Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing Children (http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/hearingloss/freematerials/Communication_Brochure.pdf)

bicultural and bilingual learning environment. ASL is usually taught first, then the native language of the family. Your fourth option is cued speech, which will teach a system of hand signals to indicate certain speech sounds. And finally, Dee could learn total communication. This uses a combination of sign language, speech, and technology to amplify residual hearing. In the approach, Dee would learn ASL and spoken English and utilizes simultaneous communication, speaking and signing at the same time.

Ma and Pa both stare blankly at the audiologist, seemingly waiting for her to make the choice. They flip through the pages.

Aud: Since she's not quite 3 yet, you're going to want to get services from an IFSP program. It's an "Individual Family Service Plan." They'll help bring resources into your home and work with Dee on communication skills. So, I'm going to hand these off to you. There's other resources listed on there as well.

Ma (*hesitantly*): Okay...

Aud: Oh wait I forgot this one. It's from Phonak—they produce and distribute hearing aids. It's another guide for parents.⁶ They cover some of the more technical aspects of hearing loss and the different offerings of technology assistance.

Pa (*softly*): Thank you.

Aud: As you leave, you can schedule an appointment for the ABR. And also, schedule another consultation to have about the schooling options, so we can get you in touch with the correct resources.

Ma: Okay, thanks again.

Ma and Pa exit stage left. Audiologist returns to her work and begins writing in a file on her desk. The lights fade on the office scene. And a spotlight is brought up on adult Dee on stage right.

Scene 2b—Dee's Perspective

Dee: That was an overwhelming amount of information even for someone who knows the ins and outs of this stuff pretty well. Imagine that slew of information being flung at you, while still trying to process the initial news that my child can't hear. My parents left that office and spent the next several nights and days trying to come to a decision about what was best. There would be countless considerations,

⁶ "My Child Has a Hearing Loss: A Guide for Parents" from Phonak (http://www.phonak.com/content/dam/phonak/gc_hq/b2b/en/awareness/pediatric/_documents/Brochure_BtC_Pediatric_Parents_Guide_my_Child_has_HL_028-0289.pdf)

some as simple as scheduling that next appointment. And other more complex issues, such as what effects will this communication approach have on the rest of our family and how do we manage the financial burden of this diagnosis. Now, that audiologist said quite a few things. She talked about testing and evaluations and education and communication, but she did forget to mention something. My parents were not alone. They were not the only parents to have this conversation and experience this confusion. Although exact numbers are hard to come by, it's estimated that for every 1,000 people, somewhere between 9 and 22 of them have a severe hearing impairment or are deaf—granted half of them are over age 64.⁷ And that may bring our number down a bit. But we were not alone. Although my parents felt incredibly scared and alone in that moment, there certainly was and will be other families with the exact same feelings.⁸ So yes, the audiologist gave some of the facts, but certainly not all of them.

Scene 3—Home of Dee

Back at the home of Dee and her parents, the parents begin discussing the slew of options that they just received from the audiologist. They have lots of papers, pamphlets, and information strewn about. There are two laptops on the couch. The projector displays their screen—the mom blog of a Deaf child and the Department of Education's school page. Ma and Pa discuss their feelings with interjections from family and friends through phone calls and messages.

The scene opens with the sound of typing, clicking, and scrolling as both Ma and Pa pour over the information. We hear the sound of a new Gchat message from Dee's friend, Mona—it appears on the screen.

On the projector: Hey! How was Dee's appointment?

Ma: Agh. It's Mona.

Pa: What does she want?

Ma: She's asking about Dee. I told her we had an appointment with the audiologist, when we got coffee last week. *(beat)* Uh...I don't know what to say.

Pa: Can't you just ignore it?

On the projector: Mona-- Everything okay?

Pa: Guess not. You should probably answer.

On the projector: Ma—Well, not quite. We can talk next week.

⁷ Gallaudet Research Institute (<http://research.gallaudet.edu/Demographics/deaf-US.php>)

⁸ Decisions, Decisions, Decisions <http://ushersmom.blogspot.com/>

Pa: Her husband's on the school board, right? Maybe he could give us some more information (*he smirks just a bit, looking at the piles around them, then returns to a state of soberness*).

On the projector: Let me know. I can definitely talk to Dan about some options, if you'd like. He'd be happy to help. We're with you—Loves.

Ma: Looks like Mona is already on that. She's going to speak to Dan. Plenty of information to come! Have you seen that woman's planner? She's going to hand me a color-coded binder about the school's services.

Pa: Some more bedtime reading.

The house phone rings. Ma looks at the caller ID.

Ma: Shit. It's your mom. I just don't want to...(*trailing off, she shoves the phone into Pa's hand*)

Pa: Fine—(*suddenly in a pleasant, pleasing-son tone*) Hi Mom! How are you?

He clicks on speakerphone. The audience hears Pa's mother (Grandma) as an off stage voice through the muffled sound of the phone.

Grandma: Hi Sweetie! I'm great. How are you and your girls? How was Dee's appointment today?

Pa: Well...about that.

Grandma: Oh no...

Ma's face shifts from the slightly annoyed daughter-in-law to a deeply concerned parent and wife. She reaches out for her husband's hand and comforts him. This will be the first person they tell. She doesn't know how she will respond to hearing the truth only they know spoken aloud. Suddenly, everything seems too real. She closes her eyes.

Pa: The audiologist confirmed our fear. She has a hearing loss, but they're not sure how serious it is yet.

Grandma (*softly*): How?

Pa: Well, apparently the medicine used to treat that infection she had a few months ago caused the hearing loss. I guess that was one of possible side effects, but it was better than the alternative.

Grandma: So what are you going to do? Did you make another appointment? Can't they just give her hearing aids now?

Pa: It's a lot more complicated than that.

Grandma: How so?

Pa: Well for one, they need to determine exactly how much hearing loss has occurred before we start looking too much into options.

Grandma: Well, I think you're going to want to get this fixed right away.

Ma (*mouth*ing to Pa): FIXED. She thinks it's a problem!

Ma rolls her eyes and turns away from Pa and the voice on the other side of the phone. Pa tries to comfort Ma by placing a hand on her knee and hoping he can quickly put an end to this call.

Pa (*into the receiver*): Mom, it's not exactly something that needs fixing. There are other options—she can go to a School for the Deaf, she can learn Sign Langu—

Grandma: Are seriously considering that? You would just further outcast her, make her different from the other kids, make her an "other."

Pa (*firmly*): I really don't want to have this conversation with you right now. We will make this choice.

Grandma, realizing that she may have been a bit aggressive earlier, takes a deep breath and calmly replies to her son.

Grandma: I just want the best for her. I love her. I love you.

Pa: I know. I love you too. Goodnight, Mom.

He hangs up the phone. He looks over at his wife, who has returned to reading the countless pages of information. The couple looks like less overwhelmed. They make eye contact and they're both quiet for a while. Ma eventually breaks the silence.

Ma: I know she has Dee's best interests in mind, but I just don't know if I can listen to anyone else's opinion on this.⁹

⁹ Kim's Story: A Mother's Perspective

<https://www.signingsavvy.com/blog/88/Kim's+Story%3A+A+mother's+perspective+of+raising+a+deaf+child>

Pa: I know. I know.

Ma: Everyone wants the best, but how do we actually know what's best for Dee?

Scene 3B—Dee's Perspective

The lights dim on Ma and Pa. Dee moves center stage again and addresses the audience.

Dee: That was an important question Ma had in mind—what was best? No one really knew, but who really knows the answer to that question. There was a lot to consider and it seems like everyone wanted to contribute his or her own two cents. Everyone had an opinion, but no one had an answer. Just as my grandma said—she “wanted the best for me.” Everyone did. But with countless options, from hearing aids to a School for the Deaf, the options couldn't be more different. Although I was young at the time, recounting this scene of my parents and seeing how they grappled with this diagnosis is difficult. As I got older, I know I would hear similar remarks about “getting fixed” and “being different” and “an other.” (*As she says these words, they are bolded on the projector adding emphasis to them*). So my parents had some choices to make and of course they made mistakes and I made mistakes along the way. Sometimes things worked out surprisingly well and other times it didn't go quite as planned. I don't know what was “best” at the time (or ever, really), but I do know that my parents took tremendous care of me and did their absolute “best” to provide for me.

Scene 4

Dee's Ma sits at the kitchen table. Instead of the teetering pile of information, there are just a few sheets of paper. She waits for Pa to enter, returning from work.

Pa (*rushing in the door, nearly tripping over his words*): So how was the appointment? What did they say?

Ma looks at him and purses her lip; she is holding back tears. She looks down. She doesn't want to answer this question because once she says it aloud it's true. Noticing her hesitation, Pa continues.

Pa: You know it'll okay, right? It'll be okay.

Ma finally makes eye contact again. Pa sits at the table and grabs his wife's hand.

Pa: So it's serious, huh?

Ma: Well, they call it a “bilateral severe to profound hearing loss.” So I think serious would cover it, more or less. Here, look.

Ma hands him a copy of some documents from the audiologist. It's a series of ABR responses and audiograms. They are projected on to the screen behind them.

Pa: What do all these red and blue circles and squares mean? And these earthquakey looking lines?

Ma: Well the “earthquake” lines, as you call them, represent Dee’s brainstem response or lack thereof. Here’s what a normal ABR would look like (*projected on screen*), here’s Dee’s. See.

Pa: And the colorful shapes?

Ma: Those tell us how severe the hearing loss is at different frequencies in both ears. So the red is her right ear and the blue is the left ear. So going up the side are the different frequencies, kinda like pitches—high and low—that we hear. And this line represents the level that is considered “normal” hearing. Then the markings tell us at what level Dee would need that pitch to be in order to hear.

As she explains this chart, it is projected on to the screen and the audience can see the sections that she’s pointing to. The described areas are highlighted.

Pa: So how do we know exactly how bad it is?

Ma: Well most people can hear at 0dB, but even 10 or 15 dB is normal. But Dee couldn’t hear until the sounds were at 80dB or higher for some frequencies.

Pa: I’m so impressed by how well you understand this and how well you just explained it.

Ma: Well the audiologists were all really great at explaining this to me. They were super clear about what everything meant. I know we were overwhelmed before, but the more I’m learning the more I feel prepared for the future. Knowledge is power, right?¹⁰

Pa: Absolutely. So what do they think we need to do next?

Ma: Well, we need to consider the options we heard about the first time. All of those are still on the table. So now that we have more details we can actually make a decision.

Pa: Okay, so what were you thinking? I just want everything to be as normal as possible and I just want Dee to be happy and...

Ma: Well I think we’re going to have to find our own sense of normal in the next couple of weeks, but I want her to be happy too. And we’ll make sure she is.

¹⁰ Hands and Voices: Raising a Deaf or Hard of Hearing Child
<http://handsandvoices.org/deafhardofhearingchildren/>

Ma (*continues*): But I was thinking about our IFSP meeting.¹¹

Pa: What does that acronym mean again?

Ma: Individual Family Service Plan.

Pa writes this down on a sheet of paper. He is determined to learn and understand all of this new “normal.”

Pa: Hmm, okay...

Ma: Well when we meet with them, there will be a group of audiologists and speech pathologists, as well as educators helping us write up a plan.¹²

Pa continues to jot notes. He seems very serious and dedicated to getting all of the information correct.

Ma: Basically, we have to set certain goals and determine a lot of the logistics about how Dee will get services. Here’s this planning guide they gave us to work on before the meeting.¹³ Let’s start easy—Languages used in the home?

Ma & Pa: English.

They seem very satisfied with their quick response, but then in the silence realize that there may be other considerations.

Pa: But should we consider learning to sign?

Ma: Well, that’s the next question—are you considering the following: American Sign Language? Conceptual sign? Cued Speech?

Pa: I think we should probably start with just one. Try to minimize the confusion.

Ma: Right, so maybe we can learn some simple signs from ASL. I know the community center has some beginner classes and I’m sure there are resources online.

¹¹ Plan for Your Child

<http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/hearingloss/freematerials/planforyourchild.pdf>

¹² Writing the IFSP for your Child

<http://successforkidswithhearingloss.com/writing-ifsp-child>

¹³ Making a Plan for Your Child

<http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/hearingloss/freematerials/planforyourchild.pdf>

Pa: Okay, this is good. I think that would be good. We can practice the signs while Dee is around too. But should we also consider some type of speech practice?

Ma: I think so. They said that she's young enough to acquire spoken language and a manual language, like signing. I want her to have access to both.

Pa nods along as he writes more information.

Ma: The next section is asking assistive technology. The audiologist wants to get her fitted for a hearing aid next week—she says that it'll give her access to "residual hearing." Even though she won't hear very much she will be able to hear some sounds and noise. I think that's important.

Pa: Absolutely, but signing will give her immediate access to a communication system. So we should do both?

Ma & Pa: Yes.

Pa: What else is on that worksheet?

Ma: Where do we want services? At home or in a clinic or daycare setting?

Pa & Ma: At home.

Pa: I want to be involved in it. Can we stay and learn with her?

Ma: Yes, that's what they recommend—that the family participate in the intervention sessions.

Pa continues to take notes. He seems to get more confident about the situation and about his role.

Ma: How often do we want sessions?

Pa: Oh, I don't know. What do we think they'll recommend?

Ma: Okay, we'll ask for their suggestion. And I know we want the services at home, but she is getting close to 3 years old and I want her to join a playgroup or a preschool.

Pa: Me too. I want her to be with other kids and interact with her peers as much as possible.

Ma: Maybe in the next few weeks we can get her into one of those groups a couple days week. I think it would be good. I really think we've made progress.

Pa: I think we're finding our new "normal." And we're okay.

Scene 4b—Dee's Perspective

Once again the lights fade on the main stage and Dee step forward address the audience.

Dee: My dad was absolutely right. This would soon be the new normal—too many acronyms to count, lots of information to learn, and decisions to make at every turning corner. He was also right when he said that we would be okay—we were. There were some complicated times ahead but we were okay. Looking back, I am simply amazed at how quickly my mom caught on to all this information. As an adult, I've studied many of these things through college and graduate school and I still grapple with some of the more difficult terms and nuances. But she absorbed it all right away. And her and my dad collaborating to make all these choices, listening to each other's perspectives and concerns just shows their true love each other and our family.

So let's talk a little more about what "normal" was for me as I turned 3. (*points to the projector and a very detailed color-coded schedule appears*). This is what my mom's calendar looked like for several years; she was little bit neurotic about keeping organized. But hey, it worked. Basically, after getting fitted for hearing aids and then getting fitted again and again as I grew, I started working with a speech pathologist three days a week at our house. The hearing aids really don't do all that much, except hear some loud sounds and amplify certain aspects of speech. The speech therapist would come and from what parents say she was teaching me to sign and to speak. But I just remember playing with toys and dressing up. I thought it was fun to have these glorified play dates every other day. All those appointments in blue were meetings and appointments my mom went to, and calls she scheduled with specialists, and the occasional break from mom-ing to go hone her ASL skills. A few months after my first meeting with our speech therapist, my parents also signed me up for a mainstream preschool. Then I was almost 3 and 1/2 years old and it was time to make my way through the education system. Unlike the easy to follow communication system at home that was suited to meet my needs directly, this preschool classroom was filled with voices and sounds completely unfamiliar to me. I would not file those first few weeks under "okay."

Act 2

Scene 1

We're back in the living room of Dee's family. Her parents are sitting on the couch with Dee on her mother's lap. The table in front of them is covered with school supplies and other necessities for a first day of school.

Ma (to Pa): Do you think she's ready for this?

Pa: Well, we'll only know if we try. At least we're aware of the other options and can change things around, if need be.

Ma (to Dee, using some minimal signing to support her speech): Dee, are you ready to meet some new friends at preschool?

Dee recognizes that this might be a scary change and quickly buries her head in to her mother's lap. Pa tries to encourage Dee.

Pa: Look, we have all these fun new things for you to take with you—a bright pink backpack, some colorful pencils.

Dee gets starts to get excited when she sees the new items that she will get to take with her. She sits on the floor and begins playing with the zippers and pockets on her bag.

Ma (to Pa): So, what about the stuff that I need to bring?

Pa: Where's that list we made?

Ma: Here!

Pa: So hearing aid batteries?

Ma: I have five sets. I think we should just leave some with the school nurse and ask her to change them as needed. And I changed them this morning so it should be fine.¹⁴She'll never be there for more than few hours so it should be okay.¹⁵

Pa: Great, and the school says we need to provide a snack?

¹⁴ Hearing Aid Listening Check

http://www.infanthearing.org/videos/featured/hearing_aid_listening_check.php

¹⁵ Especially for Parent's of Mainstreamed Kids

[https://www.gallaudet.edu/clerc_center/information_and_resources/info_to_go/educate_children_\(3_to_21\)/resources_for_mainstream_programs/especially_for_parents_of_mainstreamed_children.html](https://www.gallaudet.edu/clerc_center/information_and_resources/info_to_go/educate_children_(3_to_21)/resources_for_mainstream_programs/especially_for_parents_of_mainstreamed_children.html)

Ma: Yeah, I packed her grapes and Cheerios.

Pa: Okay, do we want to give them a contact list so they can get in touch with us?

Ma: I already made an index card with our cell phone numbers, your work number, and your mother's phone number too. Just in case.

Pa: I think she's all set then. Are you ready?

Ma: I don't know I'm worried about her first day. What if something bad happens? What if she doesn't play well with the other students? What if—

Pa: Relax, if anything happens, they'll call us. We're just down the road and we can get there in no time. She'll be fine.

Ma: I just hope we're making the best choice for her.

Pa: Well, only time will tell us. Let's just give it a few weeks; we'll keep in touch with her teachers. And just remember how great she's been doing at home. There's been such improvement.

Ma: I hope she can carry that over to school.

Realizing the time, Ma quickly leaps off the couch and starts gathering the stuff on the table.

Ma: Shit, it got so late. I wanted to be early for the first day, ya know? Give her time to acclimate, talk with the teachers, and explain some of the situation.

Pa starts helping her, he walks over to Dee and begins picking up her toys and rearranging the backpack.

Pa: It's fine. Look Dee's all ready to go—(turning to Dee) right, Dee? My girl's all ready for her first day?

Ma has finished collecting her stuff. She comes over to grab Dee from Pa.

Ma: Okay Dee, blow kisses to Daddy.

Dee blows kisses to her Dad. Ma does the same. Pa comes over and embraces both of them.

Pa: I guess both my girls are ready for their first day.

He kisses his wife on the cheek and holds on for another embrace.

Pa: Good luck!

He's clearly talking to his anxious wife, but the line satisfies both of them.

Scene 1B—Dee's Perspective

The lights fade as Ma exits with Dee. Pa returns to the couch to look over the list once again with the same energy Ma had looked at it before. Adult Dee steps forward.

Dee: Well you saw my mom's calendar, so you should not have been surprised by that masterfully organized list of first day essentials, plus some. I was young and just excited by the idea of a new backpack and toys, but my parents were nervous and rightfully so. My dad really kept calm for my mom, but I know that as soon as she left that room, he scanned over that list half a dozen more times. And mentally checked off all the items that my mom had taken with her. The disastrous first weeks that followed were by no means caused by the lack of preparation or support of my parents. They did everything in their power to make this transition successful, but I simply wasn't ready and the school didn't suit me. They really wanted the best for me, but we would soon find out that this environment was not the best, at least not for me.

Scene 2

The coffee table that was in the parent's living room becomes a craft table surrounded by 3-5 year olds. A few boxes of toys are brought in from stage left. The projector shows images of student artwork and a list of class rules. Around the table are several kids, drawing and crafting. There are more students around the boxes, holding toys and books. The teacher is standing over the table, when Ma and Dee enter from stage right.

Ma (to Dee quietly): Are you excited? We're almost there.

They enter the classroom and as they do the sounds of a bustling classroom come to the surface. We hear kids chatting, pencils tapping, toys whistling and the like. It seems overwhelming compared to the relatively quiet preceding scenes. Dee seems a little startled at first by the new sounds and voices. The teacher, Mrs. H, comes over to greet them.

Mrs. H (she is very bubbly and animated, almost too enthusiastic): Hi ladies!! (To Ma) And who is this (gesturing to Dee)?

Ma (she is signing along slowly so Dee can follow the conversation): This is Dee. She's 3 and 1/2 years old.

Mrs. H (waves and begins speaking really loud and really slow): Hi...Dee.

Dee waves back Mrs. H, but gets nervous and buries her head into her mom's chest trying to hide.

Ma: She has her hearing aids on so she can hear most of what you're saying but we're still working on making sense of what those sounds mean (*she starts to poke and tickle Dee, getting her to laugh and break away from her mom a bit*).

Ma (*to Dee*): Do you want to go play with some of those toys over there?

Dee nods and jumps out of her mom's arms. She starts to move towards the toys, but looks back to mom and gestures her follow. Ma gives her a little nudge and she goes off on her own.

Mrs. H (*to Ma*): She'll love what we have over there.

Ma: Yeah, she especially loves to play...(*her voices trails off as she watches Dee get closer to the other students*)

Mrs. H (*grabs Ma's shoulder and tries to steer her attention away from Dee*): Hey, I wanted to introduce to you the other teacher in this room—Here, this is Miss L. Miss L, this is Dee's mother—

Ma: Nice to meet you (*She's rushed and quickly turns back to see if Dee is alright*).

Dee has taken a set of blocks out of the box and sat herself down away from everyone else. She's playing by herself. Ma looks concerned; the first day is not going as perfectly as she planned.

Mrs. H: Just give it some time—we'll see how it goes, okay?

Ma: Okay. Oh wait, here's my contact information and my husband's. If you can't get in touch with either of us, his mother's phone number is there too. Oh and here's just a little kit of hearing aid batteries and tools. It shouldn't be a problem because I just changed them this morning. But if anything, you can call me and I'll come right back down.

Mrs. H: Okay, it's going to be fine.

Ma: Thank you so much. (*She walks over to Dee*) Bye Dee, I'll see you in a few hours. (*Dee doesn't look up, so Ma gently waves her hand in front of her face*). Buh-bye Dee! (*She blows kisses and Dee blows kisses back*).

Dee returns to her playing and Ma begins to exit. Then she turns back to look at Dee, who is still absorbed in her toys. Ma waves one last time.

After she exits, the classroom gets louder once again. A student, Zoe, walks over to Dee and begins to address her.

Zoe: Hi, can I have some of those blocks?

Dee doesn't even budge.

Zoe: HIII, I said can I have some of those blocks?!?

Once again Dee just continues to play, paying no mind to the other students in the room. Zoe gets frustrated and kicks the blocks in front of Dee. Dee starts to cry and Zoe picks up the blocks she wanted.

Zoe: I'm going to take these. Thank you!

Mrs. H comes over and sees that Dee is upset. She tries to console her but Dee just wails. Another student steps over and tries cheer Dee up by giving up her toy, a bear. But Dee is startled and confused and just hides her head in her lap.

Mrs. H: Zoe, can you come over here? What happened?

Zoe: I asked her if I could have some blocks and she didn't answer. We have a sharing rule, remember? So when she didn't give 'em I got mad and kicked the blocks. I took the ones I wanted.

Mrs. H: Okay, Zoe. But we also have a no kicking rule--that goes for people and toys. I understand that you were upset, but you can't kick things. I'll talk to Dee.

Zoe trots over and sits on the floor next to Dee and the teacher. Dee sees her as a threat and tries to slinks away. Mrs. H attempts to explain that Zoe was asking a question and Dee simply didn't hear her.

Mrs. H: So Dee, I want to explain what happened. Zoe asked you about sharing the blocks and when you didn't respond she got upset. It isn't your fault, but I don't want you be upset.

Dee continues to look Mrs. H; it's not really clear if she's understanding the words the teacher is saying. Dee just looks scared and confused, but she just shakes her head and pulls away again.

Mrs. H: Okay, I'm going to let you have some more play time on your own, okay?

Dee doesn't even look up, she just stares at the blocks in her lap and continues to shift them around aimlessly.

Scene 2b—Dee's Perspective

As the lights fade out, we see the group of students join together for a game. Dee remains off the side, looking down. She is clearly isolated from the group as they stand

in a circle and join hands for the activity. Adult Dee steps forward again and addresses the audience as she reflects back to this day.

Dee: There would be a few more weeks like this—me, off to the side, and everyone else joining in a game or activity. I was scared and nervous and overwhelmed, but I had no way to express that except through tears and isolation. I was threatened by this loud senseless room of people. I remember when that girl kicked my blocks; I was more upset by the sound of scattering blocks than by her action against me. We were both young and clearly it was no one's fault that I couldn't follow along. And I think that preschool teacher was simply overwhelmed by all of the students and trying to get this new girl involved was just too much for her. This isolation and fear continued for a few more weeks, the teacher tried to get me to play with other students but it just wasn't in the cards. I usually came in and went to my little corner and stayed there for as long as possible. When I joined the activities, I was always a few beats behind. I tried to follow other students' leads but I just couldn't keep up with what was going on. At some point, the teacher realized this wasn't working despite her best efforts and she called my parents in.

Scene 3

The students have emptied out of the classroom and the set is transformed to show a teacher's desk with two chairs sitting opposite her. Mrs. H is sitting at the desk, writing on a notepad. Ma and Pa quietly knock and then walk in.

Mrs. H: Hi, hi, come in. Have a seat.

Ma and Pa quietly nod and make their way across the room. They sit in the children's chairs, which are uncomfortably small.

Mrs. H: How are you both doing?

Ma: I'm okay, okay.

Pa nods along in agreement.

Mrs. H: Well, I wanted to talk to you about Dee and how she's been doing.

Ma and Pa just nod along, listening.

Mrs. H: I know we wanted to give her time and space to adjust to the environment here, but she doesn't seem to be adjusting very well. I think she's a little overwhelmed by the whole situation—with lots of other children around, loud noises, and distractions at every turn. And her response to all this stimuli is to just shut down and stay away. My main concern is that she's not benefiting from being here.

Ma: Well we want the best, most conducive environment for her to succeed.

Mrs. H: She's a lovely girl. She's kind and polite, but I don't think she's going to be able to thrive here. And I really want to see her grow and develop.

Ma: I understand. (*To Pa*) What are we going to do?

Mrs. H: We can help support you through the transition. And help you find a program that'll better suit her.¹⁶

Pa: Well, we're going to need sometime to figure it out and enroll her somewhere else.

Mrs. H: Of course. And she's welcome here for as long as you'd like. But I wanted to help you consider something else.

Ma: I understand. I just wanted her to feel...

Ma & Pa: Normal.

Pa: I know we're working on find our new sense of "normal." I just thought we'd be there already.

Ma: I know.

Mrs. H: I'm sure you'll find somewhere that's the right fit. And I'm really sorry it couldn't be here.

Pa: Can you just tell us a little bit more about how she was?

Mrs. H: Well, actually this is for you both. It's just a little log. We keep one for each of the students. And the teachers write quick stories and notes about the day.

She hands it over to Ma and Pa and they begin leafing through the pages. They smile at some of the positive messages and seem concerned about the less bright days.

Mrs. H: Wait, there's one I wanted to show you. It's from last week. (*She flips through until she finds the page*). Miss L asked all the students to draw their families. And she made this (*she brings out a piece of construction paper with a very neatly drawn group of three stick figures, considering it was penned by a 3 year old, it's incredibly impressive*). She probably is one of the best students when it comes to holding a pencil. And look how detailed these are.

¹⁶ Evaluating a School

<http://www.hearinglikeme.com/learning/parents/choosing-school-your-deaf-or-hard-hearing-child>

Ma: She even drew herself wearing her favorite dress. Can I keep this?

Mrs. H: Of course!

Pa: Thank you so much. For everything.

Ma: We'll keep you updated, as we look for a new place, but really, thank you.

Mrs. H: It's been a pleasure and we'll see Dee tomorrow, right?

Ma: Of course.

Ma and Pa shake her hand and they begin to exit as the lights fade and adult Dee comes to the center again.

Scene 3b—Dee's Perspective

Dee: So clearly we were still working on finding this sense of normal. And we'd get there eventually. Mrs. H was very understanding. She knew that this school just wasn't working out for me right now. Maybe at some other point in time, I'd do better there. But for now, it just didn't seem to fit. Honestly, I was very okay to be leaving this school. Things were tough there and I always felt out of place. It might have been more "normal" in some ways but it also was not the "least restrictive environment"¹⁷ for me. But I did find out that I loved art—I loved to express myself creatively whether through drawing, coloring, painting, or writing. Basically if it didn't involve speaking, I was on board. That would change over time, but for now it was off to a different school, in hopes of a more successful experience.

Scene 4

The projector changes to show a different set of classroom rules and work. There are posters displaying ASL and famous Deaf people. The configuration of the table changes to place the parents on the opposite side, indicating a new school location. Dee and her family enter while two teachers are at the desk.

Mrs. S (*she signs as she speaks to Dee and the family*): Hi, everyone welcome. Hi Dee, my name is Mrs. S. It's nice to meet you. (*she shakes Ma and Pa's hand*).

Dee waves and smiles. She signs back "it's nice to meet you too." Her parents are elated. This is the first time they've seen Dee use her signing with anyone but them and the speech therapist. And Dee seems satisfied and successful.

¹⁷ IFSP and IEP Comparison

http://www.wvearlychildhood.org/resources/ifsp_and_iep_comparison_040108.pdf

Mrs. S (to Dee): This is my friend, Miss Kate. Do you want to play with her?

Dee nods and even adds the sign for "yes." Miss Kate takes Dee's hand and brings her to a box of toys in the back of the room. Ma and Pa take their seats at the teacher's desk, this time they have a view of Dee the entire time.

Mrs. S: So welcome. It's really nice to have you here; your daughter is such a sweet girl.

Ma: Thank you. We're excited to be here.

Mrs. S: So Miss Kate's actually a speech therapist here, so they're playing but I'm sure Kate is trying to work in some learning.

Ma: That's great!

Ma continues to watch her daughter, who is now smiling and laughing along with the teacher.

Mrs. S: You can keep watching her. I'm sure she loves the stuff we have back there.

Ma: It's okay. I want to hear more about this school.

Mrs. S: Well, we provide a BiBi program, meaning it's bilingual and students learn both ASL and English. And bicultural in the sense that we also teach about Deaf culture, exposing students to both worlds.

Pa: I think that's a really great approach.

Mrs. S: We do too! We want students to have access to both worlds, so that they don't feel isolated from any of the people that they might encounter. We think this type of program gives students a sense of empowerment and encourages them to continue as engaged learners.¹⁸

Ma: So what kinds of students do you have here?

Mrs. S: Well there's quite a range, honestly. Some students come from culturally Deaf parents and they rely primarily on ASL, but we encourage speech through our therapy sessions. Other students wear hearing aids and have more access to sound.

¹⁸ Adapted from Texas School for the Deaf mission
http://www.tsd.state.tx.us/apps/pages/index.jsp?uREC_ID=147135&type=d&pREC_ID=348451

Some even have cochlear implants but have chosen to also learn ASL and participate in the Deaf community.¹⁹ Can you tell me a little bit more about Dee?

Ma: Well, she lost most of her hearing as a side effect of some antivirals she took during an infection when she about 18 months old. But we didn't find out about the hearing loss until she was almost 3 years old. Since then, we got her fitted for hearing aids and have been working with a speech pathologist. But we've also been learning sign language alongside her. Up until a few weeks ago, she was at a mainstream preschool program but it just wasn't working for her.

Mrs. S: Well, I definitely think she would be a fit here. We have a lot of young students that come in at very similar place. They're just starting to acquire and learn language. And if you want both English and ASL to be a part of her life, then we have the resources to give her that.

Pa: We really want her to have both. She's really taken to signing since we started working on that and I don't think we want to pull her away from something she's excelling at.

Mrs. S: Absolutely, especially when they're young we want them to be able to communicate in the way that is most suited for them.

Ma: Well I'm just concerned about us communicating with her as well. Do you have any resources for parents and family?

Mrs. S: Yes, we love having families involved and on campus, particularly with the younger students. So we allow parents to come in for the morning session from about 9am until 11am and then the rest of the day students work with their peers and teachers.²⁰

Pa: I have to be at work by 9am.

Mrs. S: We also have evening classes in ASL for parents and we keep the parent lessons a few sessions ahead of students so you're never isolated from what Dee is learning. And we're always hosting events for parents and families to come to the school and see what the kids are doing. Also, our teachers will constantly send information home about how things are going and they will call you to update you on Dee's progress.²¹

¹⁹ Maryland School for the Deaf Profile of Students
<http://www.msd.edu/info/mission.html>

²⁰ Parent Infant Program
<http://www.tlcdeaf.org/page.cfm?p=463>

²¹ New York School for the Deaf Parent FAQ
<http://198.136.61.57/newsite/new-to-fanwood/85-revision-v1/>

Ma: Wow, that really sounds like it would be beneficial for us and especially for Dee.

Her excitement is growing.

Mrs. S: We really like bringing in new students and families. We think it's important for all of our students to meet diverse peers.

Pa: So what would a typical day look like for Dee?

Mrs. S: As a mentioned we have morning parents program, so you can bring her here around 9am, and you'll spend those first two hours with her and the teachers. You'll play together and practice signing. It'll also give you a chance to meet with other parents who have kids her age.

Ma: This really sounds great.

Mrs. S: We also have an audiologist on site and she can make sure Dee's hearing aids are working and ready to go each morning.

Ma (*with bursting enthusiasm*): So sign me up!

They all laugh along at this burst of joy. This is probably the first time in few weeks that Ma and Pa have genuinely laughed and smiled without the lingering thoughts of anxiety about Dee. They are thrilled to finally have a plan for her. Pa sees Dee and nudges his wife to look in her direction. They look over at Dee with Miss Kate and see her beaming with excitement.

Pa: Well it looks Dee is on board.

Mrs. S: Great, so I think our next step should be for you to bring Dee back at the end of this week. We'll have her meet the other students and then we can fill out the rest of the paperwork. You'll get to meet more of the staff, as well. Then on Monday, Dee can start with her first day. How does that sound to you?

Ma: Perfect. Thank you so much! This really sounds like a great opportunity for Dee. I'm just so relieved.

Pa: Thank you so much. We're really excited to be at this school.

Pa and Ma get up and shake hands with Mrs. S. The three of them start walking over to Dee and Miss Kate. Dee looks engrossed in her activity with Miss Kate.

Ma: It might be a little more difficult to pull Dee away from here.

Miss Kate and Dee get up and meet with Ma, Pa, and Mrs. S.

Miss Kate (*she signs to Dee and also speaks*): Do you want to show mom and dad what you learned?

Mrs. S (*aside to Ma*): Told you, she'd sneak a lesson in.

Ma (*to Dee*): What did you learn?

Dee looks to Miss Kate nervously and Miss Kate gives a reassuring nod. Dee turns back to her parents. Dee slowly signs, "Hi, my name is Dee. I love you Mom and I love you Dad." Knowing that she remembered it perfectly, she beams a smile from ear to ear. Ma and Pa quickly embrace her. They are so pleased with this turn of events.

Ma (*signs back to Dee and also says*): I love you too, Dee.

Pa (*signs back to Dee and also says*): I love you too, Dee.

They're both holding back tears.

Ma (*to Miss Kate and Mrs. S*): Thank you so much, to both of you. Alright Dee, say goodbye to Miss Kate. We'll see her in a few days.

Dee waves goodbye and bounces alongside her mom and dad as they start to exit the classroom.

Ma (*to Pa*): I think we're closer to our new "normal."

They exit as the lights fade on the classroom set. Adult Dee steps forward to address the audience.

Scene 4b—Dee's Perspective

Dee: So that day, I would qualify as more than "okay." That was the first time I remember successfully communicating with someone that wasn't my mom or dad or speech therapist. I was able to share a conversation with her. I could relay information and I could understand her response. It was really exciting to be an environment where I felt safe and included, but also confident. I didn't have to hide off in a corner or slink into my mother's lap. So that school would be my first introduction to Deaf culture. I would not only learn the language, but also about the people and their lifestyle. That day was a start to great future. Sure, there would be struggles and challenges along the way, but here I had a support system to help me through that. My mother probably said it best though, we're definitely getting closer to our new "normal."

Scene 5

It's Dee's first day of school, again. But the mood is much changed from the previous time. Dee and her parents are excited. Rather than nervous and timid, Dee is eager to

start at this school. Her parents feel more confident that this is the right fit. Dee and her mom enter the classroom, this time filled with parents and students.

Ma: Dee, are you excited to see your new friends again?

Dee nods and she starts to run ahead of her mom and into the classroom. Instead of hiding behind her mom, Dee barrels into the classroom and walks right up to another student. They have meet before and Dee begins to play with her.

Ma (*under her breath*): I'll take that as a "yes."

Mrs. S: Hi again. (*gesturing to Dee*) I guess someone is excited to be back here.

Ma: I could barely get to her to sit still for breakfast this morning. She just wanted to be on her way here.

Mrs. S: That's great. We're going to start an activity in a few minutes so just hang tight and talk with some of the other parents.

Ma: Great.

Ma walks over to a group of mothers some of them are signing, some signing and speaking. She introduces herself using both.

Mrs. S (*signing and speaking*): Good morning everyone. First, I wanted to give a very special hello to Dee and her mom, who you all remember from their visit last week. We're really excited to have them joining us.

Ma: And we're also very happy to be here.

Mrs. S: Parents, I'm going to ask you to come and sit across from your child. We're going to do an activity together.

The parents move to the center of the stage and pair up with their children. They all sit on the floor with the children in the center of the circle facing out towards their parents.

Mrs. S: Today, we're going to work on joint attention, using the word "look."²² Parents, I want you each to take one of these boxes (*she passes them around*). And inside there are several items that we're going to learn to sign today. I want you to say and sign the word "look" and bring your child's attention to you, then show one

²² Eye Gaze and Joint Attention

<http://vl2.gallaudet.edu/files/2213/9216/6287/research-brief-5-eye-gaze-and-joint-attention.pdf>

of the items and say and sign that word. To bring your child's attention back, remind them to "look."²³

The parents begin opening the boxes and working on the task with the children.

Mrs. S: The first sign we want to work on is for "pencil." So once you have your child's attention, take the pencil out of the box and begin saying and signing the word.

The parents continue this activity. Dee, finally having a way to communicate, is eager to learn all of the signs. She picks up the words quickly and is pleased with the work she is doing. Mrs. S and Miss Kate walk around the room helping and encouraging the parents and students.

Mrs. S: Next we're going to work on the word "teddy bear." Like this (*she signs teddy bear*)

The parents practice this with their children and bring out the teddy bear from the box.

Adult Dee steps forward.

Adult Dee: Wait, can I pause this for a second? Great. First of all, this was probably my favorite sign as a child. I just thought it was so fun... and it always got me a teddy bear. It was really a win-win. This first day was incredible and the first few weeks were even better. I was learning so much and I was so eager to finally have a language that I could communicate in. Granted it was only effective with my parents, teachers, and peers. But that was okay for then. However, I don't want you to think it was all sunshine and rainbows and teddy bears. I picked up ASL pretty quickly, but it was not the same for speaking. In about 4th grade I decided that I didn't need my hearing aids because I didn't need to hear or speak to communicate.²⁴ I could communicate with parents and friends without speaking, so why bother? And that brings us to here.

The set stays the same but a 10-year-old Dee enters with a group of her peers. They are all signing, some are also speaking.

Mrs. S (*she signs and says*): Dee, where are your hearing aids?

²³ A Baby's Language Development: Joint Attention

<https://georgiapathway.wordpress.com/2013/12/04/a-babys-language-development-joint-attention/>

²⁴ I Hate My Hearing Aids

<http://successforkidswithhearingloss.com/resources-for-professionals/social-needs>

Dee (*signs*): In my locker.

Mrs. S: Well they're supposed to be in your ears.

Dee: I don't need them though. Look, I can get along fine without them. I'm talking to you, aren't I?

Mrs. S: What are you going to do during 5th period speech class? You know that Miss Kate is having you all recite passages today; it's going to be awful difficult to hear your friends then.

Dee: Whatever.

The scene with 10 year old Dee and Miss Kate freezes in this tableau. A light comes up on stage left, where adult Dee is.

Adult Dee: Let's pause this again. I realize that I was probably being incredibly rude and that my teachers were looking out for best interests. But to be honest, I had started meeting some new friends around my neighborhood. And they couldn't understand my speech, so at the time I thought the best idea was to just give up on trying to improve my speech and just stick to what I already knew—ASL. However, that was not option at my school. They really want us to understand the value of learning both ASL and English. So that brings us to Miss Kate's speech class.

Miss Kate (*she signs as she says*): Okay, today we're working on reading passages from "James and the Giant Peach." Dee, I want you to go first. Read the first paragraph on page 1.

Dee gets up and makes her way to the front of the classroom, clutching the book. She starts to sign the beginning of the story.

Miss Kate: Dee, you know this is speech class, right?

Dee nods.

Miss Kate: Well, I'm going to need you to speak.

Dee starts to utter the first couple of sounds, closes the book and begins to walk back to her seat. Miss Kate catches her attention.

Miss Kate: Dee, can you come to the hall for a minute? Everyone else continue reading.

Dee and Miss Kate walk into the hall. The following conversation is signed by Dee and signed and spoken by Miss Kate.

Miss Kate: Dee, can you tell me why you're not wearing your hearing aids?

Dee: Cause I don't want to. And I get by fine without them.

Miss Kate: Okay...

Dee: It doesn't really matter, if I use them or not.

There's a pause.

Miss Kate: Okay, can you tell me the real reason now?

There's a long pause. Dee keeps trying to break eye contact. She is clearly nervous about what is about to be said. There is something she doesn't want to admit.

Dee: I get along fine without them, especially here.

Miss Kate: What about with friends outside of school? How do you communicate with them?

Dee: I don't. They don't want to anyways.

Miss Kate: But don't you want to talk to them?

Dee: I guess. But it's too hard.

Miss Kate: It is hard. But it's not "too" hard. I know you have to put in more the effort, but they win out in the end. Dee, you're a smart, kind, and funny girl. You have so much to say, but I don't want you to only share that energy here. I want you to be able to crack those jokes with anyone and give your kind advice to anyone. Don't you?

Dee: Yes.

Miss Kate: So I need you to try because you can and you should.

Dee: Okay, I'll try.

Miss Kate: And I'll help you. Now I'll write you a pass and you can go get your hearing aids from your locker.

Dee (*gives a questioning look*): How'd you know?

Miss Kate (*before Dee can finish*): Mrs. S sort of gave me a heads up. And believe it or not, you're not the first student to think it's "too" hard. I thought the same exact

thing when I was in middle school...Now go. You still have to read that passage before the end of this period.

They share a smile and Miss Kate nudges Dee toward her locker. Dee heads off stage and Miss Kate steps back into the classroom.

Scene 5b—Dee’s Perspective

Adult Dee comes forward once again.

Dee: I was so grateful to Miss Kate. In fact, she’s one of the reasons I’m standing here today. That conversation and several more like it convinced that it was important to partake in both the Deaf community and speaking world. I loved my friends and peers at the School for the Deaf, but there were and are so many other people in this world. I want to be able to understand their perspective and I wanted to be able share things with them. I didn’t want to be isolated from them in the way that I was when I was younger. There was a way to meet in the middle and share something. I worked with Miss Kate and with others and my speech got better. I was able to read lips and then I was able to mimic what I saw to try to create speech. And if I wasn’t being stubborn and wore my hearing aids, I was able to get feedback and adjust my speech as needed. It was tedious and sometimes unsuccessful but it was worth it.

Scene 6

The classroom set stays the same, but a banner is hung reading “Congratulations Graduates.” The students, including Dee, reenter wearing caps and gowns. They are now high school aged. They are facing upstage where Mrs. S is addressing the crowd.

Mrs. S: I want to welcome everyone to this special day. Our students have worked incredibly hard for years to reach this moment. They have been supported by our teachers and staff, but also by their parents and families. I want to thank all of the parents and families here today. This is a celebration for our students but also for all of you. You should all be incredibly proud of your children and the work they have done over the past several years. We’re going to begin the ceremony by calling each student to receive his or her diploma.

This action is slowly pantomimed with each student being called up, shaking hands with the teachers and principal and receiving their diploma. While this action is silently happening, Ma and Pa turn to face the audience.

Ma: I hate to admit it, but there was a point in time when I didn’t think this would happen. I wasn’t sure if school and graduation was an option for Dee. But now I am so proud.

Pa: Me too. We’ve seen her work tirelessly through ups and downs to make this moment happen.

Ma: And we’re so excited to see what she’s going to do next.

Pa: I know she has big plans for the future. She was never one to think small.

Ma: And I know she's more than prepared to tackle the challenges she'll confront.

Pa: We're just so incredibly proud.

They turn upstage to face the graduates. As they turn, the lights are brought up on the "stage" where the graduates are.

Mrs. S: Our next graduate...Dee Jones.

She crosses the stage to receive her diploma. Her parents are beaming and stand to applaud her. The stage is full of smiles and joy. The list of graduates continues to be called. Students receive their diplomas. Then, Mrs. S addresses the group again.

Mrs. S: Congratulations to all of our graduates. You and your families should be incredibly proud of your work. This is a day of great celebration. I would now like to introduce your student speaker, who you have all voted to represent your class at today's ceremony. Please welcome Dee to the stage.

Dee makes her way from the audience to the podium.

Dee: Good afternoon, classmates, teachers, faculty, staff, parents, friends and families. As the graduating class, we are so happy to have you all here today, standing by our sides as we continue our journey beyond the walls of this school. For the past several years, we have worked hard to make this day possible. There were good days and there were bad days, but they all came with lessons to be learned. I think I speak for all of us when I say that we have not just learned about math and science, English and history, reading and writing. We have also learned about our culture and others' experiences. We have learned how to act and succeed as a community with the support of our peers and teachers. We have learned how to express ourselves. And now, we move beyond these classrooms and buildings to somewhere new. But we carry with us the knowledge, skills, and lessons we have taken from our years here. Beyond these walls, there will be new challenges and struggles. But empowered by our experiences here, we will be able to overcome. I know many of us will be together for the next years as we continue our studies at Gallaudet, but even beyond that time together we will remain a community, supported and encouraged by one another. Congratulations—we did it!

The onstage audience applauds as Dee walks back down to her seat. Again adult Dee comes forward to offer her monologue to the audience.

Scene 6b—Dee's Perspective

Dee: That moment was easily one of the proudest moments of my life. And not just for me, but for my parents and family. We had put in many hours of studying and working through all the academic assignments. And even more hours going to and from speech therapy and practicing the skills I had learned there. There were countless times when graduating seemed like an impossible task and unrealistic option. But we made it and that we, doesn't just include my peers, it also included my parents and family who supported me every step of the way. It was truly a team effort that got me through high school. My graduation was by far one of the most exciting and also terrifying moments. I felt so accomplished to be graduating high school, but nervous for the challenges of college. After that ceremony, it was off to Gallaudet University in Washington DC.

Act 3

Scene 1

The stage set in the Dee's house once again. This time there are boxes and crates lining the room. Things have been labeled as "Dee's." Ma and Pa are on stage, organizing the boxes. Dee enters carrying a huge pile of clothes.

Ma: Dee, do you really need all that stuff?

Dee drops the pile on the floor.

Dee: Yes. Look, these are sweaters for when it's chilly. Snow boots for the winter. A couple hats and scarves.

Pa: A couple? Are you kidding—that's a whole wardrobe in your hands?

Dee: Dad!

Pa: Fine, half a wardrobe.

Ma: But really, Dee, it's only August. You don't need your snow boots yet. I'm sure you'll be home before then.

Dee: But what if I love college and I don't want to come back home to visit?

Ma: I would be so happy that you loved school, but I also want to see your shining face at some point during the school year.

Dee: That's why we have Skype. Besides what if there's a freak snowstorm in DC in September? It could totally happen.

Ma: Fine. Take the boots.

Dee: Okay, I'm going upstairs to grab a few more things.

Dee quickly exits stage right.

Ma (to Pa): I guess someone is excited to get out of the house. And away from us.

Pa: I'm glad she's excited.

Ma: But I'm nervous too.

Pa: I know, I know.

Ma: I'm just not sure if she realizes all the little things we do behind the scenes to make sure she has every tool to succeed.

Pa: Her school has a great support system there. I'm sure plenty of people will be willing to jump in and help with things we normally do.²⁵

Ma: I'm worried about her. She seems so confident and self-assured about this transition but what if things don't go exactly as she thought they would. I just want to tell her about the possible disappointments she might face.

Dee reenters with a backpack and suitcase. She bounces into the room, beaming with a grin ear to ear.

Dee: That's all of it. I'm so ready to go!

Ma: Wait, before we head off I wanted to talk to you really quick.

Dee (*to Pa*): Is this going to be another "I love you, but I'm worried" talks? Cause that'll bring us to 3 this week.

Pa: You got it!

Ma: Seriously though.

Dee: Okay, okay. Yes?

Ma: I'm so proud of all you've done to get this far. And I'm excited because you're excited. This is a really big step and it's going to be a great experience, being out of the house, meeting new people, getting to see new things. It's all going to be incredible, but I want you to know that things aren't always going to be peachy and bright. There will be different challenges, but more importantly I want you know that you can still come to us. You can text us, or call us, or email us, heck, you can even write a letter. But we're always here and we're always rooting for you.

Dee (*hesitantly*): Thanks Mom. (*beat*) Really though, that means a lot. I love you.

Ma: I love you too!

Dee: Now, let's get the show on the road. We have a ton of stuff to fit into what I used to think was a large van.

Pa: Alright, I'll grab a few boxes. Dee, can you start following me with the rest?

²⁵ Gallaudet University Campus and Student Services
http://www.gallaudet.edu/reslife/campus_resources.html

Dee: Sure thing!

Pa pick up two boxes and exits stage left. Dee soon follows. Ma looks around as the room starts to empty out. She's alone for a second. Dee comes trudging back in still holding a box under her arm. She drops it in the doorway at stage left. She runs over to her mom and envelops her in a big hug.

Scene 1b—Dee's Perspective

The lights fade on the tableau of Dee and her mother. They remain at center stage, while adult Dee steps forward to address the audience.

Dee: That was very exciting time—moving to a new city, starting college, getting to live out of my parents' house and on my own. But I would be lying if I said that I wasn't nervous at all. I was actually terrified. I didn't know what life was going to be like at college. I had tons of questions and concerns—what if I couldn't understand what people were saying to me? What if they couldn't understand what I was saying? How am I going to make friends? What if I can't keep up with the work in my classes? The list of questions goes on and on. I wanted to keep up my brave act because I was afraid my parents would try to make me stay home if they sensed any hesitance on my end. But after that little speech from my mom, I knew exactly what I needed to do. I needed to go. But now my confidence was backed and affirmed by the endless support of parents. So it was off to DC for me!

Scene 2

The chairs and tables on stage are shifted to resemble a college lounge. There are students all around, chatting, texting on their phones, reading, watching TV, etc. Dee enters; she looks a little nervous as she pulls down on the sleeves of her sweater. She approaches one of the students.

Dee (*she signs and speaks to a student who has just put down his phone*): Hi, I'm Dee, I just moved in on this floor. What's your name?

Luke (*signs and speaks, also*): Hey I'm Luke. It's nice to meet you, Dee. I moved in a few days ago. It's been kinda empty until today.

Dee: Cool (*Dee takes a seat on the empty chair next to him*), why were you here so much before the typical move in day?

Luke: Well my parents thought I'd need "more time to acclimate to the new environment."

Dee: Well my mom practically tried to lock me in the house. She was a little more than hesitant about me moving a 1,000 miles from home.

They both laugh about this.

Luke: Where are you from?

Dee: Kansas City. Or as I'd refer to it "the middle of nowhere." Where are you from?

Luke: Montana, also the middle of nowhere.

Dee: So I guess DC is big change for both of us then.

Luke: Absolutely. Have you meet anyone else on this floor yet?

Dee: Nope.

Luke: Well, hold on—let me introduce you to a few people I've meet so far. At least some of them come from a place not deemed "the middle of nowhere."

Luke taps the shoulder of few others in the lounge. He begins introducing Dee to this group. Everyone is cordial and friendly. They are signing. Some are speaking, but the audience does not hear this because adult Dee has stepped forward to address them again.

Adult Dee: So all that concern about not making ANY friends quickly went out the window. I quickly realized that every freshman on that campus felt the same way. We all wanted to make friends and we all were nervous about this new place. And let me tell you something about living in the very close quarters of a college dorm, you will inevitably find friends. Because someone will need to borrow milk or won't have quarters for laundry or will accidentally lock themselves out of their room, they will knock on your door and BAM—friends! Okay, maybe it's not *that* easy. But I realized something else, unlike middle school where everyone wants to achieve this idea of "normal," no one in college cares.²⁶ There are just so many people, with so many interests. You're never the only "other" because everyone's an "other." And together all these "others" can make a pretty amazing community. And this community was just as amazingly supportive when other things were less spectacular.

The set now shifts in a classroom setting. There is a professor upstage. He looks stern, strict, and not super friendly.

Professor: Now, class. I am going to return your midterms. First I'd like to say that overall the class performed okay. There were only few As, most of you scored in the C range. I know that these grades may come as a shock to some of you, but this is different than your high school classes. I think you'll all figure it out, but it might take more time than you'd hoped.

²⁶ N.M. interview

The professor hands out the exams as students anxiously squirm in their seats. Some look relieved as they receive their paper, others frown. Dee is handed her paper and sinks into her seat.

Professor: I know some of you will have specific questions, so I'll hang around after class to speak to you one on one.

Most of the class exits. Dee hesitates for a second. The scene pauses on a tableau of this scene, adult Dee comes forward.

Dee: I'll tell you exactly what I was thinking there—"I deserve this. My writing isn't great. My written English is crap." But the next thought was "why? And how do I make it better?" Here I was in my freshman year English class, thinking about the statistics on Deaf education—many Deaf students can't read or write above a 4th grade level.²⁷ That's not a promising statistic for a Deaf college student. But I knew that I could do better, the same way I could've done better in my middle school speech class. Things at college were different though. I was going to have to advocate for myself and really put in the extra effort where necessary. So after a few minutes of contemplation, I decided to have a conversation with the professor.

Dee: I really appreciate your feedback on my paper, but I was wondering if we could go over some of the more specific details.

Professor: Of course, I'd be happy to go over it with you. Most of the errors are in your sentence structure and your grammar, but the content is really on point.

Dee: Okay.

Professor: If you want to come to my office hours, we go over each paragraph together.

Dee: That would be great—when's the best time to come?

Professor: Well I'm in my office on Tuesdays and Thursdays from 2 to 4 if that works for you.

Dee: That's great. I can definitely make it on Thursday. And I'll bring another copy of paper.

Professor: Great thinking, I'll see you then.

Dee collects her stuff and leaves the class, much more content than earlier. The lights fade out the professor and classroom. Adult Dee steps forward to address the audience.

²⁷ Deaf Education: A New Philosophy
<https://www.rit.edu/showcase/index.php?id=86>

Scene 2b—Dee’s Perspective

Dee: So that Thursday, we spent nearly an hour going over my paper, piece by piece, sentence by sentence, pulling apart my grammar. The professor explained some of the nitty gritty details of English writing that were previously unknown to me. All of the little rules and the little words. The differences between all of the prepositions. These things aren’t a huge part of signing so I needed to do some filling in the blanks when I got to a college level writing course. That supportive community at college was ready to help me and make sure that I could succeed. Yes, there were more difficult assignments and tasks and certainly difficult days, but isn’t that completely normal? Most college students have forgotten to proofread a paper and have struggled to finish an assignment. All in all, those four years had highs and lows, but I would like to ride out the highs that got me to where I am today.

Scene 3

The set transitions to communal office space. There are tables and chairs with various adults sitting and working on computers and on phones. Adult Dee takes her place at one of the chairs.

Drew (*signing and speaking*): Hey Dee, Emily and her parents are here to see you.

Dee: Great, I’ll be right out there to meet them.

She saves the task on her computer and gets up to greet the parents offstage left. Before she exits, she quickly turns to the audience.

Dee (*aside to the audience*): I’m so excited to actually be in the story that I forgot to give you some context. This is where I work. We’re Deaf Advocacy center and my main role is to meet with parents and children who recently discovered a hearing loss.²⁸ I talk them through the transition process into school and explain the various options they have. I also talk to school administrators and teachers to make the changes as smooth as possible. My favorite part is meeting the kids though, which I need to do right now.

Dee exits briefly and returns holding the hand of a young girl about age five. They are followed by Emily’s parents. The office has cleared out a bit. Emily and her family sit at the table center stage and Dee joins them.

Dee (*to Emily*): So is it true that you’re already starting kindergarten?

Emily nods.

²⁸ About the Law and Advocacy Center
<http://nad.org/issues/about-law-and-advocacy-center>

Dee: Pretty soon you're going to be older than me!

Emily giggles at the thought of this. Her parents are smiling. Another person in the office comes over and waves Emily over to play section. Dee and the parents continuing the conversation.

Dee (to Emily's mom): So this is a pretty big change not just for Emily, but for the whole family.

Mom: Right, it's a little intimidating.

Dee: I know. That's why I wanted to meet today so we can talk through a few things and make sure that Emily and the whole family is ready for this transition.

Dad: Thank you so much. I think it's going to be a huge help.

Dee: So first, Emily is staying at the same school, right?

Mom: Well it's the same campus, but the elementary school is in a different building so she won't be in the same classrooms as before.

Dee: Okay, that could be exciting but also a little stressful. Have you been to that area of the campus before?

Dad: Once, but just when they moved a P.A. meeting there. And Emily wasn't with us.

Dee: I think it would be really great if you could arrange a tour of the building and meet with the teachers before the first class.

Mom: Yeah, I was planning on telling Emily that we were taking an "adventure" over there some time next week.

Dee: Sure, it'll be really helpful for her to get a better idea of the building and the acoustics in it before she has to start actual class work. I know one of the administrators in the elementary school program, I can get you two in touch with him if you'd like?

Mom: That would be great.

Dee: I'm sure he'd be happy to figure out something for next week.

Dad: So when she moves over the elementary school, we're going to need to change the accommodations and plans?

Dee: Just a bit. There's going to be a meeting in the fall to set up Emily's IEP. It's similar to the preschool IEP we already have in place, but it's going to focus a lot

more on educational goals. Since she'll be in a different location, there's going to be new considerations for environmental changes.²⁹ Here's an example of some of the classroom-specific accommodations to consider.³⁰ Some of them might be necessary, while others aren't as needed. But I'll give you sometime to go over it before we meet again.

Mom: Great, so we'll get a chance to talk this over with you before the actual IEP meeting with teachers?

Dee: Of course, we've got about 6 weeks till that meeting. So we can go over details plenty before then.

Dad: Do you think she's ready for this change?

Dee: Well, we'll see how she handles the little "adventure" next week. But right now, I'd say she's pretty ready.

The group looks over at Emily, playing along with another member of the staff. She is signing and speaking. She seems really excited to communicate and share with this other person. This moment is very reminiscent of Dee's first meeting at the School for the Deaf, where she learned with Miss Kate.

Dee: I'll just give you a piece of advice that really helped my family during these changes and transitions—don't think of it as turbulent change and chaos, but just a path to finding a "new normal."

Mom: Thank you so much. We're really grateful for all you've done. It's been a tremendous help these past few months.

Dad: Yeah, I think we'd be lost without you.

Dee: It's been a pleasure getting to know you both and Emily. And I'll be here for all of the tough transitions and changes, but also for all the exciting and proud moments. And even for those moments of your "new normal."

The lights fade on the scene. And Dee steps out of the scene to address the audience for a final time.

²⁹ IEP Checklist: Recommended Accommodations and Modifications for Students Who Are Deaf and Heard of Hearing

<http://www.deafed.net/PublishedDocs/IEP%20Checklist%202007.pdf>

³⁰ Deaf/Hard of Hearing IEP

http://www.ontariodirectors.ca/IEP-PEI/IEP-PEI_Eng_Downloads/Deaf%20&%20Hard%20of%20hearing%20elem.pdf

Scene 4

Dee: So here I am today, thirty-six years old, having achieved so much—graduating at the top of my high school class, going onto college, and finding a perfect career. As you saw I had my fair share of challenges and struggles—from the mainstream classroom that didn't provide the right learning environment for me to my disappointing day at university. And the daily struggles I still face, like missing my subway stop because I didn't hear the conductor say it was going express, though that probably happens to most of you too. Despite all of that, I made it and I'm here. And so are you. And that's the most important thing—we're both here. For the past hour, you've allowed me to share my story, give you a glimpse into my world and my life. But really we share this space, it's not as if I'm living in my own little corner far off from the rest of you. We're here together and sharing this world together. That's why I told my story today, that's why I opened up, even though it was a little scary. I wanted to give everyone a bit of insight into who I am and who helped form my story. I wanted to show you my version of "normal." So maybe, you heard some parts of this from me and other parts from my closet family, friends, and supporters. But this (*pointing to the projector*) is my story—and now, I want to know, what's yours?

THE END.

CURTAIN.