

What?

By Emma O'Neill-Dietel

Characters:

EMMA- appears at ages between four and eighteen, hard of hearing, wears hearing aids, speech ranges from soft to very loud, depending on how well she can hear herself

AUDIOLOGIST- an older woman, speaks very clearly

SPEECH THERAPIST- a young woman, speaks very clearly

MRS. MACMILLAN- EMMA's fifth grade teacher, an older woman, speaks sharply and loudly

JACOB- ten years old, mumbles

MRS. COLLINS- EMMA's sixth grade teacher, an older woman, loud and grating voice

MOM- EMMA's mom, an older woman, speaks clearly

Note: All characters other than that of EMMA are heard as voiceovers; the characters do not appear onstage.

PROLOGUE

(A home video plays. EMMA is four years old.)

EMMA: Chloe.

MOM: How's she doing?

EMMA: Good.

MOM: Do you want to tell us about Chloe?

EMMA: Yes. But I'm not really going to tell you all about her.

MOM: Well what would you like to tell us about her?

EMMA: Chloe got a new cochlear implant this afternoon.

MOM: Oh yeah? That's nice. Why did she get a cochlear implant?

EMMA: Because she can't hear well anymore. She usually had two hearing aids but now they died in a big huge fire. A old apartment building once way way back when your-- when um when Philadelphia's house we're living in now was not built yet we lived in a huge apartment and apartment building got this huge fire and the-- and the apartment broke down.

MOM: Uhuh. So what did that do to Chloe?

EMMA: We-

MOM: The huge fire?

EMMA: Well, we escaped.

MOM: You escaped? That's--

EMMA: Yeah right onto our roof.

MOM: To your roof? And how did you get off the roof?

EMMA: Well there was this little fire escape and the fire escape didn't break neither did the roof the roof was moved onto another building that was didn't have a roof it was just flat.

MOM: So did you jump down or was there a fire truck? How did you get down?

EMMA: Well it was re-- [sneeze] it was real real close and there was this little button [sneeze] in the back of the shirt that Chloe was wearing and she pushed it and there was this little parachute that came out and we flew the parachute down there.

MOM: That's a great story! Do you want to say anything else before I turn the camera off?

EMMA: Yes. And she-

MOM: What?

EMMA: Well. Then we moved to a house down on the mountains then we moved here.

MOM: That's great! Is that the end of the story or is there more?

EMMA: No, it's the end.

MOM: That's good! Thank you for-

EMMA: Can I see it mommy?

MOM: Mhm.

SCENE 1

(EMMA, age ten, stands at a table facing the audience. Her hearing aids sit on the table in front of her. Noise is a slight buzz. AUDIOLOGIST's voice is heard, muffled, through a microphone. This is not EMMA's microphone, but rather one that is used for hearing tests. It sounds more like a traditional "testing-testing-one-two-three" microphone. EMMA is full of energy, excited to ace the audiology test.)

AUDIOLOGIST

Can you hear me?

EMMA

Yeah.

AUDIOLOGIST

Louder or quieter?

EMMA

Louder.

AUDIOLOGIST

(Adjusts the volume of her microphone.)

Better?

EMMA

Um...

(Resigned)

Yeah.

AUDIOLOGIST

Okay. You know the drill. Repeat the words as you hear me say them.

(She reads from a list)

Say the word "hot dog"

EMMA

Hot dog.

AUDIOLOGIST

Say the word "ice cream."

EMMA

Ice cream.

AUDIOLOGIST

Say the word "sidewalk."

EMMA

Sidewalk.

AUDIOLOGIST

(Her voice grows quieter as she adjusts the volume on her microphone.)

Say the word "mailman."

EMMA

(Slight pause)

Mailman.

AUDIOLOGIST

Say the word "airplane."

EMMA

(Pause. She leans forward and reaches her hand to her ear, then remembers that her hearing aids are on the table.)

Airplane.

AUDIOLOGIST

(Her voice is barely audible)

Say the word "drawbridge"

EMMA

(A longer pause, uncertain, she reaches instinctively for her hearing aids but leaves them on the table.)

Drawbridge?

AUDIOLOGIST

(The sound of her voice can be heard but her words are unintelligible.)

Say the word "toothbrush."

EMMA

(Shakes her head.)

Sorry, no.

AUDIOLOGIST

Okay, that's it for today. Your audiogram is pretty much the same in your right ear.

EMMA

Oh.

AUDIOLOGIST

Your left ear went down a little. I didn't see any wax in there so I'm not really sure what's up. Do you remember when your last ENT appointment was?

EMMA

Uh... no.

AUDIOLOGIST

Okay, well, I'll talk to your mom and see if she knows. It might be time for new hearing aids soon.

EMMA

(sighs)

Okay.

SCENE 2

(A few days after SCENE 1. EMMA is home, in her room. She writes in a diary.)

December 30, 2008

Dear Diary,

Here are my New Year's Resolutions:

1. Become a child prodigy
2. Get my own room by the time I'm twelve
3. Write a novel by the time I'm fourteen
4. Stop having worse hearing.

I know the last one isn't really my fault but it feels like it is. I feel like everyone is blaming it on me and like I should do something about it but I don't know how. I can't even tell it's getting worse!

SCENE 3

(Midday, in the speech therapist's office at EMMA's elementary school. EMMA, age eighteen, sits at a table facing the audience. EMMA's eight-year-old voice, with a heavy lateral lisp, is heard while the eighteen-year-old EMMA onstage moves her mouth to match the words of the recording. When eighteen-year-old EMMA speaks out loud, these are eight-year-old EMMA's thoughts. SPEECH THERAPIST's voice is heard through the microphone. SPEECH THERAPIST speaks very clearly and enunciates the sounds of "s," "f," and "th.")

SPEECH THERAPIST

Okay Emma, now it's time for the speech question of the day. What is your favorite animal?

EMMA

Um...

(Present-day EMMA)

You can't say "dolphins," because there's an "s," even though dolphins are your favorite animal. Well, that and also horses—you can say—no wait, you can't because horses has TWO "s" and you'll definitely say it wrong and you don't want to say it wrong because she'll correct you and tell you you're wrong and you don't want to be wrong! You could say... What animal do you like that doesn't have an "s"? Well, you can't lie...

(Eight-year-old EMMA's voice)

Dolphins and horses.

SPEECH THERAPIST

Dolphinss and horssess. Nice. Okay. Well, my favorite animal is the snake. Ssssnake.

(Beat.)

Why do you like horses?

EMMA

(Present-day EMMA)

What can you say, what can you say, what can you say? Well... they can run really fast—no, “fast” has an “s.” Oh, um... got it! They’re pretty. There. Done. You got this!

(Eight-year-old EMMA)

Because—

(Present-day EMMA)

Darn it!

(Eight-year-old EMMA)

They’re pretty.

(Present-day EMMA)

No! Becausssse! How did you not see that coming?

SPEECH THERAPIST

(Enunciating)

Because they’re pretty? Can you try that “because” again?

EMMA

Becaushe they’re pretty?

SPEECH THERAPIST

Can you hear what’s wrong?

EMMA

(Present-day EMMA)

No, of course not, because you can’t hear “s,” so of course you can’t hear what you’re doing wrong! You think you talk fine! What’s wrong with *her*, huh?

(eight-year-old EMMA)

Um...

SPEECH THERAPIST

Well, it’s time for you to go, so we’ll work on this again next week, yes?

(EMMA nods, avoiding saying “yes”)

Don’t forget to practice your “s” with the worksheet I gave you. See you next week!

EMMA

(Present-day EMMA)

You can't say "see you next week" because "ssssssee." Ugh. Whatever.

(Both present-day and eight-year-old EMMA sigh. eight-year-old EMMA waves.)

Bye.

(Present-day EMMA makes to stand up, but sits again.)

SCENE 4

(A living room that morphs into a classroom. EMMA, age seventeen, stands with her laptop practicing a presentation with MOM.)

EMMA

Okay mom. Can you set the stopwatch on your phone?

Yeah, I'm gonna practice.

What time does the meeting start again?

That's so early! And the presentation is supposed to be under twenty minutes, right? Cool, cool.

Okay. Let me know if I'm talking too fast. Here we go.

Hi my name is Emma O'Neill-Dietel. Today I'd like to talk to you about some accommodations I'll need for my hearing. Some of you may already know about my accommodations and differences--Ms. Green, this is my fourth year in your class, so you could probably give this presentation in your sleep--But I'd like to review my accommodations and let new teachers know about my needs.

First, I'd like to tell you a little about my hearing loss. There are two components to my hearing loss. I have a severe to profound sense-or-e-neural hearing loss. That means that it is a permanent loss. The hair cells in the cochlea that send the message to the auditory nerve are missing or damaged. To combat this, I wear hearing aids, one in each ear.

Although hearing aids don't make my hearing perfect, they are my lifeline. The way that hearing aids amplify sounds makes background noise much louder and more distracting for me than it is for people without hearing aids. I have a tool to help me deal with all this. It's called an FM, also known as a microphone or mic.

(Displays FM)

Wearing the FM is simple, but here are some do's and don't's.

This part is the microphone, where the sound goes into. And this box holds a battery that I charge at night. The small part is what you talk into.

You clip it on your shirt like this.

Not like this.

Here's an example.

(Noise rises, EMMA's voice disappears and reappears, now as a teacher)

Good morning everyone. Today we're going to continue with chapter five, section three.

(EMMA sits in the chair, raises her hand, waves it a bit)

I'm not taking questions right now. If you have a question come see me after class.
Um...? Um I don't have a question I--
If you need to use the bathroom you'll have to wait. This is important for the test on
Wednesday.
I-- But-- The microphone--
What? Oh. Oh! Emma, I'm so sorry!
That's okay. It's... fine. It's okay.
And that's exactly what you don't want to do!

SCENE 5

(EMMA, age sixteen, stands in a crowded bus with ANNA, age thirteen. Noise is the roar of a bus, but no other person is speaking. EMMA speaks loudly, her volume rising gradually throughout the conversation.)

EMMA

How was your day?

(ANNA responds)

Good? Good, good, that's great! How did your English test go? It was on *The Watsons go to Birmingham*, right?

(ANNA responds)

Awesome!

(ANNA responds)

My day?

(as EMMA speaks, her voice grows increasingly louder)

Mine was great! Advisory was good. Nothing really notable happened. But first period, there was a sub in English, and we were supposed to finish our discussion from yesterday. So I took out the pass-around mic, obviously, and everyone knows what to do. The sub had some questions that I guess my teacher left her because she was leading the discussion with those questions. And I gave her the mic and she was like... okay with that I guess. But then I gave someone the pass-around mic to start the discussion and the sub was like "what's that?" And usually subs let me do whatever I want—not in, like, a bad way, but no one wants to challenge the disabled kid, right? So I was kind of surprised that she asked, but I explained, you know, the usual spiel, and she was like "I don't think it's a good idea to use that, it spreads germs." And okay, I get that it's flu season, but jeez lady! It was really funny though, because everyone in the class was just looking at each other like "what is she talking about?" Anyway, that happened. Then in second period we had the geometry test, yeesh, not even gonna think about that. Then third period was lunch, and I went down to the library with—

(ANNA sighs)

What?

(ANNA responds)

What?

(ANNA repeats herself.)

I'm not being loud. This is how I talk. Anyway, during lunch I—

(ANNA reacts. Exasperated)

What?

(ANNA responds)

I don't care if the whole bus hears about my day.

(ANNA responds)

What?

(ANNA repeats herself)

It's not rude, I'm just talking.

(They stand in silence.)

SCENE 6

(An elementary school classroom. EMMA sits next to BECKY, who is not shown onstage. BECKY and EMMA are ten years old. They color in worksheets. There is a hum of Noise in the background. MRS. MACMILLAN and JACOB are heard through EMMA's microphone. The audience hears MRS. MACMILLAN more clearly than JACOB because he is farther from the mic than MRS. MACMILLAN wears.)

MRS. MACMILLAN

Jacob Adams, do you know why I called you out here?

JACOB

Uh...

MRS. MACMILLAN

Let me rephrase that. You know exactly why I called you out here. What do you have to say for yourself?

EMMA

(EMMA changes the channel on her hearing aids and can no longer hear the conversation.)

(She leans over towards BECKY)

What?

(BECKY responds)

Oh. I dunno.

(BECKY responds)

What?

(Leans out of her seat, towards BECKY.)

Oh. I don't think so. He did his eye-to-eye with Morgan yesterday.

(Leans over to listen to BECKY)

Can you not whisper?

(BECKY responds)

Yeah, I know it's a secret. But we're not even supposed to tell secrets anyway.

(BECKY responds. EMMA turns towards her.)

Shhh.

(EMMA turns away. She colors in her worksheet. After a moment, she changes the channel on her hearing aids and hears MRS. MACMILLAN and JACOB through the microphone.)

MRS. MACMILLAN

--fourth time this week you've roofed a ball during recess.

JACOB

I didn't mean to.

MRS. MACMILLAN

No excuses. I've given you three warnings. Tomorrow you'll stay inside during first and second recess. And no foursquare for the rest of the week.

JACOB

But—

MRS. MACMILLAN

No buts about it.

(EMMA switches her hearing aids off of the microphone. She turns to BECKY)

EMMA

(Whispering loudly)

I have a secret.

(Beat)

I know what Mrs. MacMillan is talking to Jacob about.

(BECKY responds)

Mrs. MacMillan is wearing my microphone.

(BECKY responds)

She said he keeps roofing the ball and he's not allowed to do stuff at recess.

(Beat)

Hold on.

(EMMA makes a "hold on" gesture. She turns her hearing aids back to the microphone.)

MRS. MACMILLAN

--or I'll have to call your mother.

JACOB

I won't.

MRS. MACMILLAN

Okay. Fair enough. Remember, three strikes, Jacob.

EMMA

(BECKY catches EMMA's attention. EMMA motions for BECKY to stop talking.)

Shhh.

JACOB

Yes Mrs. MacMillan.

(Beat.)

(EMMA switches off the microphone and turns to BECKY)

EMMA

She said she'd call his mom if he did something.

(BECKY responds)

I dunno. I missed that part. I bet--

(Footsteps are added to Noise. A door opens. EMMA smiles and returns to her paper.)

SCENE 7

(A different classroom, bigger and more full of students. Noise intensifies, chattering, buzzing, noise from outside, noise from a fan or a heater. EMMA, age eleven, sits at a desk, ALYSSA sits next to her. MRS. COLLINS' voice is heard through the microphone.)

MRS. COLLINS

The homework is on the board, chapter review questions one, two, and three. We have a few minutes until the end of the period, so you can talk amongst yourselves.

(There is a sticky note on the desk next to EMMA. She picks it up as if it is being passed to her, and smiles at the girl passing it, ALYSSA, who is not seen onstage. EMMA writes on the note and hands it back to ALYSSA. Beat. EMMA takes the note back.)

EMMA

Really? That's cool!

(EMMA passes the note back to ALYSSA, who does not talk to EMMA. Beat. EMMA takes the note.)

Sure!

Who else is going?

(EMMA waits as ALYSSA writes)

Is this, like... a secret meeting? You can tell me out loud who's going, you know.

Or... just keep writing. Okay...

(ALYSSA passes the note back to EMMA)

That sounds fun!

(The bell rings)

Oh, bye! See you tomorrow!

(EMMA waves goodbye to ALYSSA and looks after her, puzzled. EMMA goes to the front of the room and takes the mic from MRS. COLLINS.)

Um, I have a question.

MRS. COLLINS

Yes?

EMMA

I think everyone thinks I can't hear them.

MRS. COLLINS

Well?

EMMA

One girl was writing notes to me. I was talking to her but I think she thought I could only hear when someone is wearing the microphone.

MRS. COLLINS

Well, what do you want me to do about it?

EMMA

I don't know.

MRS. COLLINS

I could make an announcement tomorrow. Tell the kids why you need the microphone.

EMMA

Okay.

(Beat)

Actually, it might—never mind. You can do that.

SCENE 8

(Yet another classroom. Noise shifts, the chatter is more hushed, the street sounds and the sounds of an air conditioner are more pronounced. EMMA, age seventeen, sits next to LUCIA, age seven. LUCIA writes on a math worksheet.)

EMMA

Okay, so we want to know how many apples Jake has left. Are we going to add or subtract?

(LUCIA looks blankly at the paper)

Plus or minus?

(LUCIA responds)

A good guess, but not quite.

(She demonstrates with her hands)

If we have this many, and then we take away this many, is that adding or subtracting?

(LUCIA stares into space)

Plus or minus, Lucia?

(LUCIA's gaze falls on EMMA's ear)

Look at the paper, Lucia.

(LUCIA reaches out her hand around the side of EMMA's head slowly, attempting to be sneaky, and tries to touch EMMA's hearing aid)

What are you doing?

(LUCIA smiles, embarrassed)

You want to see my hearing aid?

(EMMA turns her head so LUCIA can see better.)

It helps me hear. Just like glasses help me see.

(EMMA guides LUCIA's hand away)

No, no I can't take them off. I have to keep them on to hear.

(LUCIA responds)

No, no, they don't hurt! They help me hear. Hearing aids, just like glasses for my ears.

(Beat)

Now, are we adding or subtracting—plusing or minusing here?

(LUCIA responds)

That's right! And what answer do you get?

(LUCIA responds)

Right, five apples! Now, we have five minutes until we go to the park. Go line up behind Ms. Maria. Don't forget your coat! Good job on math today, I'll see you tomorrow!

Scene 9

(EMMA, age fifteen, sits at a desk with her laptop.)

January eleventh, twenty-sixteen.

Hey Amy!

Guess what! I just got new hearing aid molds yesterday! They're green and blue and they look like the ocean. I forget, do you have colorful molds or just clear?

So anyway, the past few months I've had a playwriting mentor and he recently asked me what my least favorite genres/types of writing are. I told him a bunch of things that I hate reading or seeing as a play, including "disability kid" stories about some poor struggling disabled person who doesn't have any friends and then in one transformative year figures out how to be proud of their disability and be accepted and BLAH BLAH BLAH CLICHES AND FLUFF AND SAPPINESS AND I HATE THOSE!!! And then my mentor challenged me to WRITE a play that's one of the genres that I hate and make it good!! I'm super excited but super intimidated. I'm thinking of making it sort of autobiographical or maybe in vignettes and definitely a comedy. Except I can't write comedy. At all. Sooooo many hilarious things happen to me that might offend other people who are Deaf/hard of hearing, but they just make me laugh. Like this one time a guy at school accidentally hit me with a basketball and I was like "nah it's fine" and my friend was all like "APOLOGIZE TO HER YOU AWFUL HUMAN BEING!!" and the guy said kinda jokingly and kinda meanly "I can't apologize, I don't have the microphone." My friend was so angry but I was just dying of laughter. And I've overheard several not-so-nice comments about me through the microphone- those also just crack me up. I just don't know how to make these things that are funny to me be funny to other people, like, onstage. I don't even know if I'll write this play, but I wanted to share what I have so far, maybe to bounce ideas off of you, I dunno. Tell me what you think of my idea! Have you had any funny deaf girl experiences?

(EMMA picks up her microphone from the table and plugs it into her computer. She presses a button on her hearing aid and presses play in iTunes. "Flyer" by Nanci Griffith plays. EMMA begins to type on her laptop, falters, types more, then stops. She pauses the music and switches the channel on her hearing aids. She types an email as she reads it aloud.)

January twenty-eighth, twenty-sixteen.

Hi Amy!

I have two plays going on, neither of which is from the prompt that my mentor gave me, but I told him I'd keep it in the back of my mind for later- and I totally will! Some of your Deaf Girl stories are crazy! When I was younger, kids used to always try to say stuff to me and see if I could hear them and it never really bothered me, but I 100% get why it would be super annoying, especially if the kids did it in a mean-spirited way. Today my friends were playing whisper down the lane and I usually love that game because it's just so goofy but we were in gym class and I could hear, like, less than nothing. I still said I'd play and when my friend whispered to me all I heard was the name of a girl in our class and it sounded like gossip or making fun of her and I just plain don't like that stuff, even if it's with my friends. So I was like "whoops, didn't hear that at all haha, guess the deaf girl has to step out oh well!" I started laughing to myself because hey, I just used my hearing loss to get out of an uncomfortable gossipy situation, hooray!

SCENE 10

(EMMA, age eleven, sits at a table with a plate in front of her. Noise is now the chatter of a restaurant, plates clattering, a light hum. Children sing.)

CHILDREN

Happy birthday to you
Happy birthday to you
Happy birthday dear Robin
Happy birthday to you

(CHILDREN clap and cheer. Noise rises to a roar, people talking over each other, passing out pieces of cake, arguing, and conversing. EMMA looks frantically up and down the table, trying to follow the conversation. She thinks she hears someone call her name, looks behind her, but then her attention is called back to the cacophony at the table.)

MOM

(barely audible)

Emma.

(MOM speaks louder than before.)

Emma.

(EMMA startles; MOM has tapped her on the shoulder. She turns around to face MOM)

EMMA

What?

MOM

Deb asked if you want cake.

EMMA

What?

(EMMA looks forward, where “Deb” is standing, though Deb is not seen by the audience. Deb says something, and it is clear that EMMA is trying to follow her, but can’t. EMMA looks at MOM for a lifeline, exactly how MARIA looked at EMMA in the previous scene.)

MOM

(louder, enunciated)

You have to tell Deb if you didn’t hear her.

EMMA

(suddenly shy)

Uh...

MOM

Ask her what she said.

(EMMA is growing incredibly embarrassed)

EMMA

Um... what did you—

(She watches Deb speaking but again, doesn’t hear. She shakes her head and turns to MOM.)

What did she...

MOM

(sighs)

She asked if you want chocolate or vanilla.

EMMA

Oh.

(EMMA’s attention is pulled once again by the conversation. Laughter erupts. EMMA tries to laugh but looks upset.)

MOM

Are you okay?

EMMA

(quietly)
Yeah.

MOM

Come outside.

EMMA

But the cake-

MOM

(in the direction of "Deb")
We'll be right back.
(EMMA walks to the front of the table and stands, obviously avoiding eye contact with MOM, who the audience imagines is to EMMA's right.)

EMMA

I wanted to stay.

MOM

You couldn't understand anything they were saying.

EMMA

I... It's okay.

MOM

It's not okay. Do you want to sit somewhere quieter?

EMMA

No. I wanna be with the party.

MOM

You're not having any fun, though.
(Beat)

EMMA

Maybe I could sit somewhere else. With just Robin. There's too many people talking in there.

MOM

It's Robin's party, he probably wants to sit with everyone else.

EMMA

But...

MOM

Do you think any of your friends understand?

EMMA

What?

MOM

Do you think any of them understand how hard it is for you to hear in there when everyone is talking at once?

EMMA

I think so.

MOM

I don't think so. None of them understand how your hearing aids work.

EMMA

Robin does. He's like my brother.

MOM

No, he doesn't. If you want them to do something to help you hear, you have to tell them. You can't assume that they'll include you.

EMMA

But...

(sighs)

MOM

They don't understand. They can't.

(Beat.)

EMMA

(sighs)

This is why I don't like parties.

MOM

Let's sit out here for a few more minutes to take a break from the noise.

(EMMA sighs. EMMA sits down and turns her hearing aids off.)

EMMA

(deep in thought)

Robin's my best friend... Of course he understands. Right? I think? I mean, if I asked him... I guess I never explained to him about how I can change the channels on my hearing aids to "microphone only" or "no microphone" or a little of each... But that's not *that* important. He never says "never mind" when I ask him to repeat something. So... that's something. But there was that time when we were doing a puzzle a last week and he said--no. I don't wanna think about it, I don't I don't I don't! My friends get it. They get it. They get it, right? You know, I bet Mom doesn't even get it. She's never had hearing aids in her ears! But... when I was little she used to put my hearing aids in for me and change the batteries and she takes me to the audiologist and she can always tell when I can't hear something so... Well, she definitely knows a lot. Maybe not *everything*, but probably more than anybody else who's not me. I wish I could just put my hearing aids in Robin's ears so he would understand. But that wouldn't even work because they'd be too loud for him! Well... it's not like I can never play with Robin again because he doesn't hear what I hear. I just have to be okay with him not knowing.

(Beat. EMMA turns her hearing aids on again.)

Mom? I think I'm ready to go back to the party now.

(Music rises. Blackout. Music continues to play as lights rise for curtain call. Music fades out.)