

ZOE'S WORDS

Written by

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"A father's secret gamble grants his autistic daughter speech and newfound abilities, until the truth surfaces, shattering his marriage and forcing the family to choose between heartbreak or hope."

Dedicated to Parents of Non-verbal and Autistic Children

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FADE IN:

INT. JOHNSON'S HOME - MORNING - DAY

In a chaotic home kitchen, MAYA JOHNSON,, a 36 African American mother of two, wearing nursing scrubs, stands packing a bag, while balancing a phone on her shoulder.

Her daughter ZOE, a 16 year old girl, non verbal, & mentally challenged, rocks back and forth, unassertive to her surroundings vocalizes softly to herself. Knocks down a bowl breaking it and starts crying.

Maya's son MALCOLM a 17 year old high school senior eats cereal, watching his mother struggle from what seems to be their normal morning day to day, just shakes his head.

MAYA
Are you serious?

MALCOLM
What?

She rushes to calm Zoe. Embracing her hands, then bends down to clean up.

MAYA
It's okay...It's okay baby.

Zoe calms, back to rocking and vocalizing. Maya shoots him a look of exhaustion apparent.

MAYA (CONT'D)
Go to the bus stop. You're going to be late.

MALCOLM
(Grumbling)
I'm always late because of her.

Maya looks hurt but says nothing. Malcolm grabs his bag and leaves.

MAYA
Have a good day baby.

MALCOLM
Yep.

INT. JOHNSON'S HOME - BATHROOM - MOMENTS LATER

JORDAN JOHNSON, husband, father, 36 African American trims his beard. In the hallway Maya passes by carrying Zoe's bag.

MAYA

Babe, can you take Zoe to school?
She missed the bus this morning. I
have a double shift today.

JORDAN (O.S.)

I can't. I have a mandatory
observation this morning in 30
minutes.

MAYA

And I have to get to work too.
She's ready.

JORDAN

I can't babe. If I miss this, I
miss out on a much needed bonus for
us. Money is tight.

MAYA

And you think me being late again
is helping us...Look I'm just
asking for your help please.

JORDAN

I can't babe. Sorry. My job is more
important financially for us. We're
drowning damn near. I can't afford
to show up late today. Please.

Maya, frustrated shakes her head as she stands at the doorway.

MAYA

So what I do doesn't add to this
household....Whatever...

JORDAN

I didn't mean it like that.

Jordan notices her frustrations. She heads to the living room.

INT. JOHNSON'S HOME - DOORWAY - DAY

Maya gets Zoe by the arm and guides her to the door. Jordan meets her at the door.

JORDAN
Wait. I'll take her.

Maya relieved.

MAYA
Thank you babe.

They kiss, she kisses Zoe on the cheek.

JORDAN
I'll see you later.

MAYA
Okay...I love you Jay.

JORDAN
I love you too honey.

INT. JORDAN'S CAR - DAY

We see Jordan buckling his daughter in her seat. Smiling in her eyes.

We capture him driving along the city, city scopes, skylines, the beauty of suburban PA.

He turns on a song and we watch his daughter smile and rock.

JORDAN
Oh you like that right?

Jordan glances back at her in her own world.

EXT. SCHOOL - DAY

We capture him guiding her to her school aide. He kisses her on the cheek.

We watch him pull off as she disappears through the double doors.

INT. RESEARCH FACILITY - DAY

A sterile, modern laboratory filled with high tech equipment. Dr. Kent (50s) white male, sharp and methodical neuroscientist studies a 3D holographic model of a human brain.

A small team of technicians scattered throughout the room work.

On a nearby monitor, a promotional video for the "Polaris Neural Enhancement chip plays on loop.

Dr. Kent scribbles notes as a technician, an Asian male, JEREMY approaches.

JEREMY

Do you think we're ready for an actual test run?

Dr. Kent, pauses briefly.

DR. KENT

I'm just skeptical of the side effects, & the possible long term effects, but I'm sure we can possibly limit it to a trial amount, at least... until we can assess and develop it further.

JEREMY

Right...

DR. KENT

We just have to find a family open to the experiment.

Dr. Kent, exhales, looking out the window.

EXT. PA BUSINESS DISTRICT & SUBURBS - DAY

A bird eye's view of a commuter friendly district. We see trains traveling, buses, people crossing the streets.

INT. BUSINESS OFFICE - DAY

We see an acquisitions expert speaking with Jordan and his coworker STEVE about their delivery business.

EXPERT

So it seems you guys are in tact to increase your logo. You just have to continue this model and you'll see expediential growth quicker than usual by the next quarter.

Jordan and Steven nod and fist bump one another.

INT. COFFEE SHOP - DAY - MOMENTS LATER

The two guys gather coffee from the counter and exit the store in friendly banter.

EXT. SIDEWALK - DAY

STEVEN

So what do you think about everything?

JORDAN

Man, I feel great about it. We just need to maybe hire three to four more staff to alleviate our extra runs we take.

STEVEN

Right, but I think we should consider only two for now.

JORDAN

Expand based upon additional contracts...Right. Makes sense.

STEVEN

I just can't wait until we've grown enough, where I'm home in the evenings more.

JORDAN

Tell me about it...It's rough for me right now. Missing Malcolm's games and then Zoe requires more attention now that she's older.

STEVEN

Yeah, man I forgot. Senior year for him.

JORDAN

Yeah...Don't get these moments back. New season starts soon. Last year I missed so many. Zoe with these seizures...It's a lot.

STEVEN

Have you guys considered a home health aide?

JORDAN

Man we've tried. They keep quitting on us. She's a handful.

(MORE)

JORDAN (CONT'D)
Maya is not trying to hear about a facility or anything.

STEVEN
I get it. Considering the things we see on the news at some of these facilities.

The guys slow down and have a seat at a bench.

STEVEN (CONT'D)
How you two been though?

JORDAN
Man...Like roommates. But we're trying.

STEVEN
Hey, that happens. Yall will get it together.

JORDAN
Sure hope so. But yeah man, taking care of a special needs child, I promise is not for the faint of heart man. I Just be sitting there sometimes wondering if she really feels the love or Does she fully understand us to an extent.

The two sip and look.

INT. NURSING CENTER - DAY

A small unit of nursing staff maneuver around, in and out of rooms.

We arrive to a breakroom, there we find Maya, head on a the table napping. NANCY a Woman (30)s enters.

NANCY
Aww look at you beat.

Maya slowly awakens.

NANCY (CONT'D)
Long night, or long week?

MAYA
Both...

NANCY

I have been there myself. We work hours like damn truckers.

MAYA

I have to say, that is crazy right. Sure do.

NANCY

You and your husband need to go on a vacation or something. Don't want to overwhelm yourself.

MAYA

I wish we could, but my daughter has hit a stage unlike none other as far as caring for.

NANCY

How old is she now?

MAYA

Turning 16 next month.

Nancy now sits down.

NANCY

Growing up... Well keep doing what you're doing, but it's okay to get some help and take a break from time to time. Rest is just as important as finances.

Maya nods her sentiments on the subject.

MAYA

Thanks, well let me get out here before Arlene starts screaming my name again.

NANCY

Ok girl...See you out there.

EXT. COFFEE SHOP - CONTINUOUS

Jordan and Zoe step out of the coffee shop, chatting as they head down the sidewalk. Behind them, Dr. Kent rises from his seat, watching intently before calling out.

DR. KENT

Excuse me... Excuse me, sir.

Jordan stops, turning with a wary expression. Zoe pauses beside him.

JORDAN
Uh, yeah? Can I help you?

Dr. Kent approaches with a polite but deliberate stride, offering a small, professional smile.

DR. KENT
My name is Dr. Elijah Kent. I'm a
Neurocognitive Research Specialist.

Jordan blinks.

JORDAN
Okay... and?

Dr. Kent hesitates, choosing his words carefully.

DR. KENT
I was inside, and I happened to
notice you and your daughter, she's
on the spectrum, isn't she?

Jordan's expression shifts, his posture stiffening.

JORDAN
I don't believe that's none of your
business.

Dr. Kent raises his hands slightly, trying to ease the tension.

DR. KENT
Of course. I meant no offense. It's
just... I specialize in cognitive
development, especially in
individuals with neurodivergent
traits. I believe I may have
something that could help her. Give
her chance of normalcy. I have a
study that --

Jordan exhales sharply, shaking his head.

JORDAN
-You don't know her. And you don't
know me.

Dr. Kent reaches into his coat and pulls out a sleek business card, offering it without pressure.

DR. KENT

You're right. I don't. But I do know that sometimes, breakthroughs come from the places we least expect.

Jordan stares at the card, then back at Kent. After a long beat, he snatches it and stuffs it into his pocket without looking.

JORDAN

Don't follow me again.

Without another word, he turns and walks off, Zoe following closely behind. Dr. Kent watches them his expression unreadable.

EXT. SKYLINE, TIME LAPSE - DAY TO NIGHT

We see the change of time through a skyline view.

INT. JOHNSON'S HOME - NIGHT - MONTAGE BEGINS

We see quick cuts of the interactions of Jordan and Malcolm prepping for dinner, both assisting Zoe, feeding her. Malcolm interacting with her while they color on her coloring book.

We see her smile and laughing. Malcolm does a particular gesture that makes her burst in laughter and excitement. Jordan feeding her, prepping her for bed.

INT. JOHNSON'S HOME - ZOE'S ROOM - NIGHT

Jordan reads her the book "I am enough" by Grace Myers.

JORDAN

The end...

He closes the book, then strokes her hair as she lays sucking her finger.

JORDAN (CONT'D)

You like that book still huh kiddo!?!...Sometimes I wonder what's going on in that head of yours. Wonder if you're talking to me and understand me.

He stands up and pulls the cover over, kissing her gently on her forehead.

JORDAN (CONT'D)
Good night.

He turns on her night light, and closes the door halfway, smiling at his angel. Then exits.

INT. JOHNSON'S HOME - MALCOLM'S ROOM - NIGHT - MOMENTS LATER

He enters down the hall to Malcolm's room, sits on the edge of the bed and while Malcolm plays.

JORDAN
What you playing dude...

MALCOLM
2k...

JORDAN
You don't want no sauce.

MALCOLM
Here you go. You haven't learned yet have you.

Malcolm hands him his game controller.

MALCOLM (CONT'D)
Black top Twos or Ones.

JORDAN
Ones.

Jump cut

JORDAN (CONT'D)
You ready for the new season?

MALCOLM
I guess.

JORDAN
What you mean you guess.

MALCOLM
It just don't seem the same now.

JORDAN
Yea, I get it things change as you get older. If it feels you're forcing it, then it's okay to break from it.

MALCOLM

Yeah...But I mainly just want to ball with my friends though. Least for my final season.

JORDAN

Right...I want you to have fun dude. You'll never get these days back growing up. Ask any man who was into sports in high school. If we could be go back, man! Good times.

MALCOLM

Yeah, hopefully you and mom will be able to make a few games this season. Be nice if Zoe could too...

JORDAN

Yeah, we're gonna try.

MALCOLM

You ever wonder what she thinks about us?

JORDAN

All the time... (game) You cheesing.

MALCOLM

How?

JORDAN

I wasn't ready on that...

The two chuckle and continue their banter.

Suddenly, we hear the door from downstairs open, along with keys. Maya approaches Malcolm's door.

MAYA

Aww look at you guys, male bonding.

JORDAN

Hey babe. How was work?

She walks up kisses him.

MALCOLM

Come on yall...Don't start.

They laugh...

MAYA

Oh I can't kiss my husband
now...How about I move around and
just kiss my lil baby boy.

She gets mushy and Malcolm tries to focus and stretch away
for sake of his game. Laughter ensues.

MALCOLM

Come on mom, you're about to have
me lose to a scrub.

JORDAN

Oh you talking junk huh. Okay
playa!

She laughingly exits, then we follow her to Zoe's room. She
enters and leans down to kiss her gently, watching her sleep
peacefully.

MAYA

(whispers) God help us.

INT. JOHNSON'S BEDROOM - NIGHT - LATER IN NIGHT

Jordan turns, his wife missing, he gets up and proceeds
downstairs.

INT. JOHNSON'S KITCHEN - NIGHT

Upon his entering the dim lit kitchen, sits Maya, drained and
teary eyed, a wine glass filled with red along with stacks of
bills in front of her.

JORDAN

Can't sleep?

MAYA

Too much on my mind.

JORDAN

What's wrong...

Jordan heads to the kitchen getting a glass of water and
turns.

MAYA

I had a charge on my account I was
unaware of...And I wasn't trying to
tell you, but I'm two months behind
on the mortgage.

Jordan straightens up.

JORDAN
What!? Wait, I deposited....

MAYA
--I know. I thought I'd be able to
get it back. I keep getting extra
charges.

JORDAN
Why didn't you just cancel the
account or as a matter of fact, why
didn't you just tell me from the
jump.

He shakes his head frustrated.

MAYA
I know...We were already dealing
with the sitter and other bills. I
just thought...

JORDAN
You didn't think quick enough.
Dammit. How much we owe?

MAYA
Like \$3200 up to date. The sitter
resigned today too.

JORDAN
Another one.

She nods, as he paces back and forth, grasping the thought of
everything. A beat rests as they attempt to think then,

JORDAN (CONT'D)
You know what? Considering the time
we're out and these expenses, Maybe
we should consider other options
that's less in cost.

Maya's eyes dart up, as if she can laser through Jordan.

MAYA
Consider other options?

His eyes meet her as well.

MAYA (CONT'D)
I know for sure you're not bringing
up no facility. Are you kidding me?

JORDAN

Maya we can't keep doing this.
We're barely holding it together.
You're late to work regularly and
I'm missing opportunities, and not
to mention, this is Malcolm's
senior year. --

MAYA

-- No, don't you bring Malcom in
this.

Jordan ran a hand down his face, trying to stay calm.

JORDAN

I'm not trying to make this harder.
But this isn't sustainable. You're
not getting any younger, Maya. We
need to think long-term."

The words hit her like a slap.

MAYA

She's our daughter, dammit. I
REFUSE TO put her in a facility.
Not while I'm healthy. She's safe
here... Suck it up DAD! This is
part of the duty of parenting. For
better for worse also.

JORDAN

She's my daughter too. I'm just
being logical. Our quality of life
is suffering at the moment. I'm
just saying it's temporary until we
get our shit together.

MAYA

Good night Jordan...

She stands with a disgust, shaking her head. Leaving him in
deep thought.

INT. JOHNSONS KITCHEN - MORNING

Jordan enters the kitchen dressed, gently assessing Maya's
appearance and body language before he speaks.

JORDAN

Good morning.

She shakes her head, obviously still upset and bothered.