Aphasia

by

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Commissioned by Plan-B Theatre for Play at Home
Aphasia: a condition that robs you of the ability to communicate. It can affect your ability to speak, write and understand language, both verbal and written.

Characters

Debbie - Daughter of Janice, Black, late 40’s-something, middle class. Born and raised in Baltimore, left for college, never returned, code switches when talking to her mother. She is close to her mother but the relationship dynamic is loaded.

Janice - Mother to Debbie, Black, early 70’s, retired. Born and raised in Baltimore, tough as nails, stubborn, undiagnosed depression.

Vangie - Building Manager of a senior living, low-cost housing complex.

Ruzynia - (Roo-ja-nah) Tenant in the senior living housing complex.
(January 10. Present day. We are in Debbie’s university office, she is giving last minute notes to college work study students for a big event. Office is small but colorfully decorated. Her cell phone rings and she sees that it is her mother. She hesitates, but decides to answer).

Debbie
Excuse me for a minute. I have to take this… Hi Mom, what’s up-

(She hears her mother screaming/crying in the background)

Janice
-Debbie, I can’, I can’t I can’t, I- I- I- I’m can’t! HELP MEEE!

Debbie
Mom, Mom what's wrong! Calm down! What’s going on! What’s happening? Mom stop screaming, calm down.

Vangie
(On the phone; Janice screaming in the background DEBBIE!!!!!!!) Hello Debbie, this is Vangie the building manager, Ron the maintenance man says your Mom was acting weird and then started talking funny. He came to get me and we think your mom might have had a stroke. The ambulance is on its way.

Janice
Debbie, I can’t, I’m tr. I can’t I- I- I- (gibberish gibberish gibberish gibberish gibberish)

Debbie
(On the phone) Mom, it's going to be okay. You have to calm down okay? I’m here, just breathe, just breathe. (Debbie is much calmer on the phone than in real life) They will bring you to the University hospital which is a block away from my office. I'll meet you at the hospital okay?, I'll stay on the phone until the ambulance gets there.

Debbie
(In the hospital room with Janice, who is sleeping) Hey Mom. So I went ahead and um did the concert last night because the show must go on, right? It was a good concert. Real tender and shit cause you know I told everyone in the audience that my mom had a stroke so all the emotions came out… Nurses told me you fought the EMT’s like you were Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson. Dropping bitches! (She laughs uneasily) When I was on the phone with your building manager, she was describing how many people were in your apartment - cops, firemen, EMT's, plus the
maintenance guy. I bet you were in serious fight-or-flight mode. Remember that Grey’s Anatomy episode of the woman who has a stroke? In her head she thinks she is talking and everyone can understand her and she is wondering why people aren’t listening to her. I wonder if that’s how you felt. You, a self-imposed hermit who doesn't particularly trust white folks or hospitals anyway! Huh, suddenly being surrounded by white men! *(laughs to herself)* I bet you were channeling “Wakanda Forever” like a mug! Shit! I’m surprised they even got you to the hospital...

Debbie

*(January 11, the next day, in the hospital room with Janice, who is sleeping)* Hello doctor. No, I understand what you are saying. I'm not trying to be cavalier, or unfeeling but you are the sixth or seventh doctor, social worker, nurse or whatever in the past three days asking the same damn question. I'm trying to be realistic here, but with each person that comes in here asking me the same damn question over and over again, I’m starting to question my decision. A decision that I did not come lightly. Maybe you all have to cover your ass, but this is irksome. And I don't need a social worker to help me navigate my feelings. I am perfectly capable of doing that on my own. What I need is some sound advice from an expert. I know that my mother has not been the greatest advocate of her own health. She has had smoking-related breast cancer twice and a polyp removed from her colon. A neck fusion, with some titanium still floating around in there that the orthopedic surgeon refuses to go in and remove because she still smokes and he is afraid she’ll bleed out on the operating table. On top of all that she has the black trifecta: diabetes, high cholesterol and high blood pressure. She is a tough-as-nails woman who has lived a rough life, but I'm not going to make her suffer anymore than she has to. And while I have watched more medical shows than I care to admit, I am not stupid. I know that CPR would crack her ribs. And that the rest of the extraordinary measures would probably be more painful and difficult to heal from than what she already has to face. I also know she is a manic depressive who is not a very good patient. So what I need from you is an honest answer. Off the record, okay? But I’m looking for your expertise as a doctor and also as a regular, schmugular human being. If it were your mother in that bed, with this medical history. Knowing what you know. If she quit breathing or needed life sustaining CPR, what would you do? *(...Long pause)*

Thank you doctor, I appreciate your honesty.

Debbie

*(January 17, in the hospital room with Janice)* Hey Apollo Creed, you been in and out for about six days now. Are you going to stay awake finally? You had a stroke, your brain is fuzzy and you will have a hard time finding words right now. *(Janice points to the bedside table)* You want - what is it, water, applesauce- *(Janice shakes her head)* Oh! this *(She holds up an In-&-Out cup)* This is not soda! It's a milkshake, but I'm sorry, you can't have this right now, the doctor
said only ice chips and juice and bland-ass hospital food for now. (Janice growls) Didn’t lose that growl! Yas! That is great!

**Janice**

*Heavy sigh*

**Debbie**

That too! That’s what's up. (*They both laugh)*

*(Pause)*

*(Janice motions to smoke a cigarette)*

**Debbie**

Of course you want to smoke but you can't do that either. That’s why you are here in the first damn place, so no! I will not be buying you cigarettes.

**Janice**

FuckShitDamn! Ooops!

**Debbie**

Oh you remember the good curse words, I don't know why you're apologizing, I've heard those words before. Not all strung together like that…that’s new (*they both laugh again*) My friend who is a neuro PT, said that we store curse words in a different part of our brain. He said, “If you want to know what you would say if you ever had a stroke and lost your speech, just put your hand on a table and bang it with a hammer. That’s what you would say…”

**Janice**

P-p-p -p-p *(struggles to get the word out)*

**Debbie**

Do you need to use the bathroom? You have a catheter you know.

**Janice**

P-p-p -p-p *(it is really hard to get the word out)*

**Debbie**

Pencil, you want a pencil to write something?
Janice
P-p-p P-o-oh-oh-oht

Debbie
P-P-Pot? Oh Pot! that’s a good word too. I love you Mom. But I am not going to jail for you.

Debbie
Mom, Today is Jan-u-ar-y th-ir-ty. Can you say that Jan-u-ar-y th-ir-ty? No, ok! It's been 20 days since your stroke and you've been refusing to do PT, OT and speech therapy. I know that someone poking and prodding you all night to give you drugs and then getting you up every two hours to exercise isn’t your idea of a good time but people pay good money for this. Look, I don’t know what to do here. I feel like I just keep apologizing for letting people do things to you that you don’t want. You don't want insulin, you don't want a catheter, you don't want doctors or nurses bothering you, you don't want to do PT. What do you want?

Janice
L-l-e-t me d-d-die.

Debbie
(Exasperated) Really Mom! Really Do you understand that if you keep refusing care, you won't die right away? I know that nurse that talked about palliative care, told you you could die peacefully in your sleep and that is all you have held onto but that is no guarantee. Fuck, it could take months. I want you to have governance over yourself but how can I be sure that this right here, is really you in there. That it isn't the depression talking.

Janice
Let me g-go.

Debbie
(Both of them are crying and screaming) I'm sorry Mom, you said you wanted this, they won't let you go back to your house, so we had to bring you to a nursing home. You said you understood. You said you wanted to be left alone, no doctors poking you, no nurses waking you up in the middle of the night! I can't take care of you. Mom, I'll come see you every day. What do you want!

Janice
(Crying stops suddenly) A cigarette.

Debbie
Are you fucking kidding me right now? You’ve been without one for 20 days, why start now?
Janice

C- C-Cigarette.

Debbie

If I buy you cigarettes, you will calm down until the morning.

Janice

(Sniffling and regaining composure) Ye-Ye-Ye Yeah.

Debbie

Fuck it! Fine.

(A month has passed)

Debbie

Hi Mom, It's a beautiful day this February 27. Can you say Febru-ar-y?

Janice

F-F-F Feh, F-F-F Feh, Fork.

Debbie

Close.

Janice

F-F-F Feh, F-F-F Feh, Oh fuck it.

Debbie

Good job! That was a whole sentence. You look good. Want me to wheel you outside for a smoke?

Janice

Yes, p-p-please.

Debbie

Did you eat?

Janice

Nasty.
Debbie
You say that every day. All the food can’t be nasty?

Janice
It is.

Debbie
Okay well I brought you some fruit and a gyro from Mad Greek.

Janice
Yay!

Debbie
How is your roommate, Rita?

Janice
Nasty.

Debbie
MOM! You say that about everything! Why is Mrs Rita nasty?

Janice
No! she’s nasty (motions with both hands the entire length of her legs).

Debbie
Oh you mean her open sores.

Janice
Yeah , they nasty… (heavy sigh from both, then long pause) My house (Janice pleads).

Are you asking about your apartment? (Janice nods vigorously) I’ve been paying the rent on your apartment. You said you wanted palliative care- no doctors, no insulin, to be left alone remember?

Janice
Want.. my h-house.

Debbie
Mom, You can't go back home. I mean, you can if you prove to the nursing home that you can live on your own. Take care of yourself. Do. PT OT and Speech.
Janice
Okay.

Debbie
Okay? You changed your mind? Now you want to do all of the stuff you wouldn't do at the hospital?

Janice
F-F-For h-h-home? Yeah! *(matter of factly)*

Debbie
You want me to sign you up for PT, OT and Speech?

Janice
Yeah! *(said with a LOT of attitude)*

Debbie
Okay… *(said with a lot of confusion)* I’ll go talk to the caseworker.

Janice
Thank you, baby. P-p-preciate you.

*(10 months have passed since the stroke. It is a mild November day and Janice and Debbie are in the apartment about to go out for a walk.)*

Janice
My-y things? My, my stuff, oh phooey.

Debbie
Take your time mom, It will come to you.

Janice
I see it. I just can’t get it out.

Debbie
It's okay, can you show me what it is you are looking for? *(She goes to a closet and points, gestures like she is knitting)* Oh! your latch hooks. I donated them when I cleaned out your closet. *(Janice starts to cry, softly)*
Janice
I'm sorry Mom, I didn't know if you would even be coming back to this apartment. I'm really sorry. We can get you new ones. We can take your Jazzy up to Michaels right now.

Janice
I want my-my stuff!

Debbie
I know, I am sorry. Do you want to go get new ones. *(Janice cries harder)* I am sorry I gave away your stuff. There is nothing I can do about them at this point. Do you want to go out for a walk? *(Janice starts to wail)* Mom, I'm sorry. I can't do this right now. I'm going to take a walk.

*(Debbie is exasperated and goes to the end of the hall and sits by herself. A few minutes pass and we hear Janice coming out of her apartment she is attempting to put on her coat while pushing her walker clumsily. She is the crying LOUDLY and it is rather comically Debbie hears her and yells down the hall.)*

Debbie
Mom, what are you doing!

Janice
Im sor -sor- sorry baby.

Debbie
It's ok mom. Just go back in the house. I just need a minute. *(Ruzyina opens her apartment door quickly, walks over to where Debbie is sitting, looks down the hall, looks back at Debbie)*

Ruzyina
Why is mother crying? *(heavy Russian accent)*

Debbie
*(Incredulous)* I don't know. She’s sad.

Ruzyina
Okay. *(Nods head firmly and returns to her apartment)*

Debbie
*(She walks toward Janice)* Mom, go back inside. *(She motions for Janice to turn around. Janice trips, falls slowly to the floor and begins to bawl while rolling around on the floor while whispering “I'm sorry.”)* Are you fucking kidding me right now- Mom get off the floor please. This carpet is nasty! Mom,
please get off the floor. *(Debbie grits through her teeth as more neighbors open there door to see what the commotion is)* Get. Your. Ass. Off. The. Floor. *(She picks up Janice with all her strength, and drags her to her couch. She goes back to close the door and sits in the opposite chair.)* ARE YOU KIDDING ME RIGHT NOW?!

Janice

I'm sorry I don't want to.

Debbie

You don't want to what?

Janice

Be a bur burbe a bur *(she is still crying)*-

Debbie

You just threw a public tantrum because you don't want to be a burden?

Janice

Yes! *(bigger crying)*

Debbie

Oh My God!

Janice

I’m sorry baby I ‘preciate you.

Debbie

You got a funny way of showing it.

Janice

I do, You do everything for me. *(more crying)*

Debbie

Who the hell else is going to do it?

Janice

I don't want you to, I want you to live. I just want to die.

Debbie

Nice full sentences. If it wasn't so morbid.

Janice

I’m sorry.
Debbie
Mom, I love you. I really do. You don't have to be sorry. You just have to keep working on your new normal. I can't imagine what you are going through.

Janice
It's hard.

Debbie
I haven't stopped living my life. I put some things on the back burner so I can fill out the massive amounts of paperwork. Now you are signed up for every resource imaginable.

Janice
What can I do?

Debbie
I just need you to stop being prideful and accept the help.

Janice
Okay baby.

Debbie
(She moves to the couch and hugs Janice) Mom, I don't mind taking care of you. You did it for me. You are my mother. I have always expected this and I am okay with it. Now, I'm need you to be okay with it and stop kirking out on me. You got these people thinking I beat you. Did you hear Ruzyina (Debbie mimics her accent) “Why is mother crying?” (Janice starts laughing) It's not funny.

Janice
Yes it is! (She laughs for a few more moments, Debbie joins her) Thank you baby.

End Play