

Elizabeth Haynes / SYNAPSING

DIARY OF BARBARA EVELYN DECHESNAY

October something

The next door neighbour mows his lawn. The CBC Vancouver Orchestra plays something Wagnerish — George would know it. He sleeps.

How am I feeling? Here's a thunderous part — clash of drums, cymbals, the heavens falling in.

That about describes it.

October 3

Fed George dinner — the modified soft. He refused to eat the carrots, took a mouthful and spat them back onto his plate.

"Bady."

"I know it looks like baby food, just have another spoonful."

"Badyshit!"

"Listen, I'll talk to Dr. Fitzsimmons about it, but for now we . . ."

"Pit-pa, no Fit-pi, no Pit-pi, shit!"

"Something about the doctor, dear?"

"Yes, Fit . . ."

"Fitzsimmons, dear."

"Shit."

"It's not about the doctor?"

"Doc . . ."

"You're feeling sick?"

"No!"

"Do you want me to keep trying?"

"NO!"

I tape record and transcribe our conversations. For Mona, the

speech therapist. So she can see how we communicate in the “home environment.” Should I put in how carrot dribbles from the corner of his mouth, how his lips twist up when he tries to talk, how I hold my breath? Waiting.

We used to play a tongue twister game when the girls were young: howmuchwoodcouldawoodchuckchuckifawoodchuckcouldchuck If a wood chuck could chuck . . .

George always won.

P.M.

Did the speech therapy homework — I write the words and he copies them and then I say each one and he says it after me. He wouldn't watch my mouth today, kept trying to say the same word over and over again — “Es-se Es-be Et-me nononodamnhell.” The swear words come out perfectly. I said we'd try Esme later.

But I forgot. Then we went to bed.

October 4

To therapy today: OT, Rec therapy — the RT seemed put out because he didn't want to make a wallet, the leather kind stitched up the side with horses' heads on the front. I told her he's never liked those kind of wallets, always thought they were gauche. She said that was the activity for today. I said then he won't participate today.

He got a new physio. She took his cane away and made him walk, up and down, up and down the gym. At the end, he was totally exhausted, tried to say “bye,” tried to make his lips push “b.” By the time he got it out, she was on to the next patient.

October 6

Went to see Dr. F while George was in OT. I had to wait; there was a long line of us stretching down the corridor and out the waiting room door. “Calgary General Hospital,” said the brass sign on the green wall. “In the business of caring since 1890.” The man beside me was falling out of his wheelchair. He said thank you when I straightened him. Kept saying “thank you, thank you, thank you.” It's called perseverance.

Dr. F. has a brass sign on his door: Dr. William R. Fitzpatrick, M.D.

F.R.C.P. He told me to sit down. He opened a file. I read *DeCesnay, Geo (C.V.A.): 57 yr old male, University Music Professor, no prev Hx arteriosclerosis, admitted 7/30 with . . .* He saw me and closed it. Confidential. Not for the spouse.

While he talked, I stared at the print above his head — a bamboo tree beside a raging river.

He said to try George on solids. He said his upper and lower extremities show some improvement.

I said George used to play eight instruments proficiently, one — the violin — magnificently.

He said there is not much change in George's speech.

I said he can say parts of some words like *Ba* for *Barb* and the girls' names, *Es* for *Esmé* and *Gin* for *Guin*, and important words, short words, like *eat* and *go*. Some "automatic" phrases, too, like *thank you* and *OK*.

"Yes," he said, "but the aphasia is still significant. And it's been three months since the infarct."

"Two and a half," I said. "And he has apraxia, *verbal apraxia*, Dr. Fitzsimmons. It's a motor speech problem."

"*Fitzpatrick*," he corrected. "And your husband, Mrs. deChesnay, also has aphasia, a language problem. The two normally go together, you see."

7th

I called Mona while George was sleeping today and asked her about the aphasia — "impairment or loss of the faculty of using or understanding spoken or written language," according to my *Random House College Dictionary*. Because of his apraxia it's hard to tell exactly how impaired his language skills are, she said. "His auditory comprehension for functional material seems fairly intact," she said.

We are listening to Sir Colin Davis and the Philharmonia Orchestra playing a little night music (filed, by George, under MS — M for Mozart and S for Serenade in G Major). He is wearing a cream turtle-neck and his beige Harris tweed suit with the leather patches at the elbows. He's smoking — something French by the smell of it. He smiles. Thinking? Remembering that summer we spent in Nice,

playing Beethoven's *Sonata #7 in D Minor* for me on the roof, under a sea of stars?

This allegro bit is his favorite section — duDUdu duDUdu the horns proclaim.

"hmHMhm hmHMhm," hums George.

I am thinking of having a luncheon. A small one, with the girls, perhaps Marj and Andrew if he promises not to mention the quartet and she promises not to run on too much. We'll have salmon en croute, a lettuce and endive salad, perhaps a chocolate mousse. We'll listen to some Vivaldi, drink tea in the front room under an Indian summer sun.

"duDUdu duDUdu," sings George.

How do I feel? He seems almost normal. I feel almost happy.

Still October

Breakfast tick physio exercises tock nap tick lunch tock speech exercises tick news tock supper tick

Tempus fugit.

Guin says I need some time alone; he can go to his therapy by himself on the handibus. I said, "Is that what they teach you to say in Social Work school?"

I made her cry.

Wanted to say, "Sorry, it wasn't me." Wanted to. Couldn't.

I don't think he'll go on the handibus. He's too proud. Much much too proud. They can tell that, I think, his therapists. They are very respectful. His OT says he's refined; she loves his silk shirts and "those scarves." "They're called cravats dear," I corrected her.

I told George later. He laughed and laughed. He couldn't stop. They call it lability.

next (week?)

George sleeps. My writing time. Sometimes when I'm writing, I catch George looking at me suspiciously. He makes excuses, then, to call me, to find his speech book, to make him a cup of tea, to draw him a bath.

We called Esme last night — George's idea.

This morning I wrote down some more words for him to try to

copy but didn't have time to say them with him because I had to go shopping. I hate to leave him but there wasn't a bone in the house (not even for the dog). So I copied down *Esme, Guin* (*Guineviere* is too hard, says Mona). He pointed to me and managed *Ba* so I wrote down *Barb*, too. Then I came up with a few more useful words (*eat, bath, walk, tea*) and left him. When I came back, he was bent over the paper, his hair standing up electric the way it did when he used to sit at the piano trying to get a passage right and he was singing. Singing "Es-me, Es-me, Es-me" — the emphasis on the "me" but he got it. "That's it," I cried because it was his first time. "You got all the sounds," I shouted, hugging and hugging his electric head.

The mind synapsing.

October 10

These days I've been preoccupied with the coming winter. I hate to drive in the snow but whenever I mention the handibus George scowls and says "nonoshit." Not even if you miss your session with that Irish Mona, I joke, pretty her mouth and green her eyes. He smiles, remembering the Salinger story? He read it to me once. Upon a time.

Aphasia. Absence of speech. Out of phase. Out of time.

Esme called yesterday, wants to sell all her possessions, move to Mexico and study Spanish. "A rolling stone gathers no moss," I said to George. He frowned, shrugged. I can just hear Dr. F.: "It's the receptive aphasia, difficulty understanding verbal abstractions."

On Sunday the girls came over. Guin sat on George's lap, fixed him cups of tea which he sipped, two-handed clumsy, liquid dripping down his chin. She read him passages from a book called *Peace, Love and Healing*. Esme played some Puccini on her tuba.

Es wanted him to play. I had to drag her into the kitchen, tell her about limb apraxia, how he can't do things with his hands volitionally, voluntarily, on purpose, so don't, don't you dare ask him to play!

"I didn't know," she said, lip trembling.

All afternoon his eyes followed the girls. He smiled, nodded, didn't try to talk.

Someone looking in our window would never know.

October ?

The song *Feelings* has been running through my head all day.

George used to say pop music was facile. "Imagine people listening to drivell like that," he'd say, "when there's Mozart, Beethoven, Dvorak, Chopin, Bach, Liszt, Mendelsohn, Mussorgsky, Wagner, Handel, Shostakovich, Rimsky-Korsakov . . ." The names slipping off his tongue.

Now he is trying to fix the catch on the screen door; it's been banging in the night, waking him up. He's clumsy, drops the screwdriver. "Damnshit," he says, "godamnhell."

9:00

I've been thinking tonight. About speech. Or, rather, notspeech. That stall of nerve, myelin sheath, synapse, misfiring or not firing at all. Those voluptuous elegant words: procencephalon, mesencephalon, dienchephalon, rhinecephalon — forebrain, mid brain, hind brain,

that old animal reptilian brain.

The tape recorder was on.

He was trying to tell me something.

"Ba?"

"Yes?"

"Ah-sho no fo no . . ."

"Do you want to watch T.V.?"

"No, uh, sot no sof."

"Sofa, something about the sofa?"

"Nono-fo . . . damnshit."

"Fo, fo? Phone, do you want to phone someone?"

"Fo!"

"Fo? Folk, folk music? Do you want to listen to some folk music?"

"FO!"

"OK dear, I'm trying."

"SO FO damnshit!"

"I'm trying, fofo, fold something? The laundry? Your shirts?"

"Shit."

"Show me."

"SHIT."

"I don't know. What? Can you write it?"

"FOFOFO!"

"I DON'T KNOW WHAT YOU WANT!"

He pushed me.

Bastard.

October 12

There. I stroked it out.

Were an embolism so easily erased.

Yet I do feel better. I am sitting on the love seat with a glass of Bristol cream sherry, remembering how George and I listened to music on Sunday afternoons: the dog — was it Johanne then? — asleep on George's feet, the morning paper discussed and discarded, the girls reading in their rooms, Brandenburg Concertos crashing the hours away.

And now?

Now I will draw the curtains and turn down the heat. I will pour myself another sherry and put on a little music — something quiet so I don't wake him. I will wrap the afghan around my feet. I will empty this monkey mind.

Oct 13

It's an off day (non-therapy). George is listening to *Water Music*. I sit at the kitchen table, watching black storm clouds trudge towards me. Amazing, the sky was so blue this morning. I tiptoed out, left George sleeping, felt guilty — no me to answer his BA, BA. I left a note. He can read at the simple sentence level, says Mona. The note said simply:

"Gone to the P.O.

Back toute de suite."

(She didn't say if he could still read French.)

Clouds ran off across a cerulean sky.

Midnight

As I write this I watch my pen move across the page, the words running easy, cortex nerve muscle nerve cortex, circling without thought — recording, inventing, making a world.

Tonight he didn't know where to start writing on the page. A new clean white page. Started at the bottom and wrote off the side, couldn't get his hands to do what he wanted. They gestured wildly, dangled awkwardly out in space like drying on a line.

“ □ ” for E, “ ⊖ ” for B.

“No it's backwards do you see, and the E is one line down three across. Now connect them watch me,” I said.

But he can't. Connect. He's condemned to roll that stone of language — confused conglomerate of letters and sounds — up the mountain.

Marj said “Why don't you get him an ABC book?”

“Because he is not a child.”

Sometimes.

P.M.

Dark already. What happened to daylight savings?

Words without thought. Thought without words. If the words don't come, are they there? Mona says yes. If we don't think in words, how do we think? If there are no words, what makes memory? “Such a solemn procession of notes,” George used to say of the *Concerto Grosso Number 12 in D Minor*, one of his favorites. Such a solemn procession of words. Buddhists talk of emptying the mind. How when there are always words inside to analyze, explain, cajole, exhort, berate?

Does he hear the world in sounds — *forte*, *pianissimo*, *allegro giusto*, *andante con lamento*, *poco a poco*?

At first he'd cover his ears, everything too loud suddenly, the world giant cymbals crashing in.

Outside a wind mourns, branches hammer at the window to get in, mad dendrites fading into black.

Does he see the world in images?

October 14 (around midnight)

Today we listened to Mussorgsky, *Pictures at an Exhibition*. George was in his usual place, the old leather armchair in the corner. His eyes were closed. His fingers thrummed the table beside the whiskey decanter, a glass, some music journals. The window above me was open a little, letting in a wind that rattled the last of the leaves against

the eaves — cold but George keeps the heat so high. I was in my usual place on the settee, diary in hand. Waiting. Waiting for George to say “What are you writing?” “Maybe we should give Esme a call, see how that tuba piece is coming?” “There’s a French baroque chamber ensemble playing next week.”

His fingers tap tap *andante angelic* on the table. Tap tap, rattle of leaves, tap tap to his favorite, *La Cabane de Baba-Yaga sur des Pattes de Poule*. Remember, George, how Guin used to have those dreams, about Baba Yaga, the house-woman in that book you bought, pictures all garish blacks and reds, you remember? Esme loved it, though, didn’t she? Then the pomp of *La Grande Porte de Kiev* and . . .

“Ba?”

“Yes?”

“Co, uh, cose.”

“You’re cold?”

“No, toes.”

“Your feet are cold?”

“Cozh!”

“You want some more clothes?”

“CosecoseCOSE.”

“I don’t know. Can you tell me another word?”

“Door, no. Widow.”

And I got up, my old bones pulling me to earth, and shut the window.

Oct 15

Didn’t stay for therapy today. I had to shop for the luncheon.

I’m listening to the *Rites of Spring*. A young girl dances herself to death, sacrificed to the Gods of spring.

Stravinsky dreamed it.

dumdumdumdumdumdumdum

To appease the Gods. What Gods? And why — what life to appease? A young girl’s? An old man’s? Why? Still life there, still so much he had to do. The quartet was good, was getting recognized. He was looking forward to retiring in a few more years, thought he might get a chance to be Head of the Department, Acting Head anyway. He would make some changes, offer more first year music appreciation

courses: “The kids in music are already converted, we have to reach the others. So many lost, wild kids, out of control. They need to learn to love.”

If music be the food of love . . .
dumdum dumdum
play on.

A girl dances, whirls out of control. A young girl, an old man. Not old, dammit — 57, prime of life. I encouraged exercise. We walked, camped, biked. I cooked low cholesterol meals. He wasn't overweight, he didn't have high blood pressure

I DID EVERYTHING RIGHT
I DID EVERY DAMN THING RIGHT
just one of those things
a bit of the heart shoots off

Oct 16

Today, it is. The luncheon. The salmon is in the oven, the chocolate mousse is chilling in the fridge. I'll make the salad at the last, chopchop the endive, tear the leaves small, so he can manage them. He comes in, frowns — at my writing? — asks:

“What time?”

Asks:

“Who?”

Practises:

“Es-me, Gin, Marg and An-dew.”

Says:

“Four. OK Four. OK Four.”

He's changed his clothes twice. Decided on the brown tweed with a pink silk shirt and brown cravat.

“He-llo An-dew, no, An-dew, shit, An-drrew, Hello Es-be, Es-te, damn!” I know I should go and help him. Yes, I will, I'll put this away, in a minute. “He-llo, he-llo, how are you? Find, fine, fine. Fiiiine. III'm fiiiine, Gin, Guu-in, Es-me.”

Now he's humming something familiar, yes, I remember

*Sweetest little Barbie
Everybody knows
Don't know what to call her but she's
mighty like a rose . . .*

Don't cry, for God's sake, it's only a song. They'll be here any minute. Put this damn thing away.

4:30 P.M.

He watched at the window, had the door open even before Marj and Andrew got out of their car. He cleared his throat, took Marj's hand, kissed it, said "He-llo Marj." He shook Andrew's hand gravely, shaking and shaking, "He-llo An-dew, An-drrew. How are you?" And they both said, "Hello, hello, George, so good to see you, you're looking so well."

Marj chattered on and on as usual. "He looks wonderful, you wouldn't even know." I quickly whisked her off into the kitchen, before she could ask him to play, leaving Andrew and George alone in the study.

The girls arrived together — Esme with her tuba and Guin with two books about people who recovered from strokes. George sat at the head of the table and smiled and nodded and said, "pass mik" and "thank you" and "good." He pushed the salmon deliberately onto the fork with his knife, slowly lifted shaking fork to mouth like a little child, so careful not to spill.

Then we listened to Esme play a piece I didn't know and after a little, Andrew joined her on the piano. The piece was sad and haunting, the deep bass notes of the tuba wrapping around themselves, the piano pulling them out, sending them up.

We all clapped. George was the last to stop.

And now they're gone and George is sleeping.

The sky's a deep purple, lights are coming on. A chinook blows around the yard. Leaves whisper to the eaves. The CBC Vancouver Orchestra is playing something gentle: "Ten tender flutes and the violins trembling pianissimo," says the announcer. I open the window, rest my elbows on the sill and breathe dirt, dry leaves, perhaps a

flower, stirring bulbous and ancient under the soil.

A hand on my shoulder. I turn and there's George in his blue velvet dressing gown, one side of his face flushed and crinkled from the pillow, the other cold and white.

"It went well," I say.

And "right" — write? — is his reply.