

You Say Potato, I Say . . .

Category: Dementia

written by Les Cohen | March 2, 2025

New York radio station WBAI has Gershwin classics on all day. Ella Fitzgerald and Louis Armstrong are singing the one that always made her laugh. I hope she's still able to hear it; I turn up the volume:

You say potato, I say po-tah-to,
You say tomato, I say to-mah-to, . . .

She sits mute, a breathing statue whose life has been slowly erased from within.

Our days are gray, bleak, silent. Her silence can last days, sometimes weeks. I hear only half-words, gentle grunts, mumbles, and sighs. I wonder if she is able to think.

What! Am I imagining this? Is that her soft voice singing along with Ella and Louis? A small smile begins to replace her blank stare, like a glistening ray of morning sun.

The many MRIs and CAT scans did not show an untouched musical nucleus, a lyrical synapse, a glowing dot amid the gray cerebral nothingness,

But now that a sign of life is peeking through, I'll blanket her with music! Yes, of course, Cole Porter—"It Was Just One of Those Things" was always one of her favorites.

Over time, songs from *The Pajama Game*, *Damn Yankees*, and *Oklahoma* brought faint smiles and fragments of singing.

Happily, I played other favorite musicals, too. But eventually, even the magical lyrics of *The Sound of Music*, *West Side Story*, and *Gypsy* were not able to bring forth the faintest of smiles.

Soon she entered into peaceful, endless sleep.

Was it all her coda?

On some nights, I think I hear her singing our songs.

I join in.

Les Cohen

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