

DIDDY

Ken Sparling

I didn't really have anything to say.
I just liked writing—I liked pushing
a pen across a page without
having to call the result an essay.

-Helen Garner, *The Art of Fiction*

#255, *Paris Review* Issue 241, Fall

2022

Let Me Talk And You Can

Listen

I am sitting in the chair in the living room where I always sit.

**I REMEMBER BEING A KID
RIDING ALONG THE BEACH ROAD
IN DAD'S CAR WHEN
“TELL ME SOMETHING GOOD”
CAME ON THE RADIO.
I ASKED DAD TO TURN IT UP,
AND HE DID.**

I couldn't quite understand
what anything meant.

Anymore Of This And
I Might Lose My Mind

I want to understand.

I do.

Honestly.

I mean it.

But The Things I Try To Say

Move Back Inside Me

Like A Dream Sunk Inward

I Want My Life Back

Experts claim that the situation here poses no real health hazard, so they are not in a position to close us down, much as they would probably like to.

Pull Yourself Closer To Me

I Need To Feel Your Warmth

I take Parky to the airport bus.
Then I drive home and sit alone
in the driveway for a while, counting
things off on my fingers.

Outside the front windshield, a
tiny replica of the sun shines in
the red tail light of my neighbour's
car across the street.

I was reading about roses,
and about the attorney general,
when my time ran out
and I had to see about
closing up shop.

I Stop Off To Get A Coffee
At A Donut Shop
On The Way Home

“You want to hear about last night?”

“Fuck, just tell me about it, Sparling.”

“Okay, but you have to stop kissing me like that. I can’t think with you kissing me like that.”

“I don’t want to hear what you think, Sparling. I want to hear from your heart. I want to put my lips inside your chest and feel what your heart tells me inside my mouth.”

What Kills Us Is Always The Next Word

It was already tomorrow.

The girl in the yellow tube top
was nearing the intersection
of College and Bathurst.

At the frat houses
on George Street, boys were
singing quietly to themselves
in the showers.

Another dog appeared in
the front window of the
Henderson house
on Bernard Boulevard.

On Mount Pleasant, there's a
place where the houses
stop briefly and there's just
a lot of trees. Behind the
trees is a golf course.

*No Horses Passed By
The House This Morning*

I think with the girl in the yellow tube top, I was already nearing some sort of resolution, or maybe I was beyond resolution and just savouring it all, the way you do when you get all the ingredients out of the fridge and get ready to cook, and it feels like it is going to be impossible to ever deal with it all, and then you are doing the cooking, and you are waiting to see how things will turn out, and finally, in the last stage, you eat, you savour, you stuff yourself, and then you're not hungry anymore.

I Was Starving For A
While There This Morning,
But Now I Feel So Full

They had a meeting.

They had it in the kitchen.

Neither of them liked meetings.

Their goal for this meeting

was simply to make it a

good meeting. They wore their

bathrobes to the meeting.

**That's When I Heard The Stink Bomb
Go Boom In Front Of
The Convenience Store**

**When my dad calls, I am
fully aware of the fact
that he is already dead.
And anyway, I have
nothing left to say to
him. “I’m at work, Dad,”
I finally tell him. “I have
to get back to work here.”**

God arrived at exactly

2:00 p.m. eastern standard

time. I know because

I checked my watch

to see if he was late.

You appear among the others
feeling a bit lost.

When you disappear, it isn't a
disappearance, really, it's just
a trick of the mind.

You do not know
who these other people are.

You can try to pretend
that you know, but all along
you understand that this

just isn't true.

You Can Stop Me

Anytime Now

This other person you are facing
here is going to take you in,
and then push you back out,
like something excremental.

I Realized This Morning That
I Am Unable To Believe Myself
While Listening To An Audiobook

I used to be a poem.

I was a poem about love.

I was about other things, too.

But mostly, I was about love.

I know how you sometimes
worry that someone will find
out the truth, but I have to
tell you, someone will always
find out the truth.

Somebody already has.

Through the window,
I can hear the recycling truck:
the roar as it moves toward
the next driveway; the clunk
of plastic on metal as the guy
dumps the bins into the
back of the truck; and then
the thunk as he drops them
back down onto the pavement
at the end of each driveway.

Looking out from the living
room, I can see the glow of
reflective tape wrapped
around the calves of
joggers in the street.

Sunlight comes through the window, catching the tops of things – my knees folded up under a brown blanket, the tips of the plant with the yellow-spotted leaves.

At the end of the day, the

rattlesnake plant closes.

Its long skinny leaves

stick straight up

as they huddle together

like penguins in a snowstorm.

YOUR APPOINTMENT TO MEET
WITH THE OTHERS ISN'T TILL
4:00 P.M., SO YOU DECIDE IT
MIGHT BE OKAY TO SIT A
WHILE LONGER IN THE
BATHTUB TRYING TO READ
THE LEAVES AT THE BOTTOM
OF YOUR TEA CUP.

The boss came running out of the site office and called up to me saying he had a job and that I was to hightail it over to the pit immediately. So I fired up the digger and lumbered down into the

pit. But on the way
down, I got to pondering,
so that by the time
I arrived at the bottom,
I had decided to park
the digger and not do
the job. I left her idling
and put my feet up on the
console. I was tired.

Tired of this job, tired

of the woman I was
married to, tired of
being tired. I went to
sleep. When I woke,
I could hear the boss
hollering down from the
brink of the pit. I looked
up over the shovel and
saw him. There he was,

like he'd arrived out of
my dreams. I kicked the
digger into gear, lowered
the shovel into the mud,
and lumbered forward.

I like this room. There's a big window across almost one entire wall, and some trees I can see outside that window, and some houses across the road, and behind the houses more trees – huge trees that rise up from a ravine, which has a little river running through it. As I stand in my living room looking out this window, the blond boy from across the street comes out onto his front lawn carrying a cob of corn.

HE WENT TO THE
GROCERY STORE.

HE COULD BARELY WALK.

HE FELT SO FULL OF
WHATEVER IT WAS THAT
WAS FILLING HIM UP.

BUT HE HAD TO
KEEP WALKING.

I went there once,
to that place in my
mind, to meet with
some people, and
afterward, on the
way back to work,
I stopped at a bank
machine.

I don't know how
any of these things
continue to happen.

I sat on the subway,
trying not to turn
my head.

WHEN GOD DIED,

HE BECAME A MAN.

AND THEN, WHEN SOMEONE WROTE A HISTORY OF JESUS,

HE TOO BECAME A MAN.

THUS, YOU CAN SEE THAT WHAT KILLS US

IS ALWAYS ANOTHER MAN.

I rode into town on the third day
in a bid to deny the rain.

I wanted to get some coffee
and some juice and a lemon,
and possibly some sour cream.

**When I got back,
I went for a swim.
Then I sat on the deck out front.
It was Thursday.
The sun shone through some trees.
My chair was comfortable.
Little whitecaps popped out of the
lake and glistened, like the lake had
white hair for the sun to shine on.
It was windy.**

**The wind made a different sort of
sound from that of the waves.
But the two sounds seemed related.
It was like a really loud whisper,
and then above that another really
loud whisper, and the two whispers
were trying to meet each other in a
kind of urgently whispered harmony.**

Tomorrow, I go home.

I dreamed I had a body
and everybody else was
shadows. The shadow people
could see me, and I walked
among them, and they
reached out to touch me,
and I laughed. Their shadow
hands could not hurt me,
and they suffered as I had.
I wanted them to suffer.

“Everything just fell apart,” a man says. God glances down. Shakes his head. *When was everything ever together?* he wonders.

Later, it will rain. People in grey coats will line up, stand in puddles, wait.

Dee-de-deet-deet-dee...

Newsflash:

Grey sweaters are
no longer available
at this location.

"You're late," I said.

"No I'm not." God held up his arm for me to see his watch.

His watch was one of those wind-up jobs old guys get when they retire.

I looked at it for a moment.

"Your watch is slow," I told him.

I showed him my phone.

“You can’t get those shoes anymore,” the salesperson told me, “except at certain locations.” She waited for me to say something, but I didn’t. “And even in those locations,” she added, “all that’s left is red. And then only in size 17.” I still didn’t say anything. “Your feet are petite,” she said, looking down at my feet. “And anyway, you don’t want red shoes.”

As I struggled to remove the car keys from my pocket, I dropped my éclair in a puddle. I looked at it and swore. I thought about picking it up. I could see puddle water seeping into the brown paper bag. I never should have parked by a puddle. I looked back into the donut shop, expecting to see everyone laughing. No one was even looking at me. No one had noticed my fallen éclair.

I called out to the assembled masses:
"Look at the veins in my arms."
I held up my arms.

The assembled masses looked.

"They are blue," a small boy called out.

"Like rivers," shouted a woman.

"They look like a complex system of
waterways," yelled a man at the back.

"They are like a map,"
said the President of the United States.

“Like something made by satellite a hundred years ago,” says the poet laureate. “Then lost,” she adds.

“Forgotten,” says the toastmaster general.

“Then found again in a cabinet in a little corner office in an abandoned building on the other side of town,” says Moyra.

“Where the sun don’t ever shine,” says a little girl who needs to blow her nose.

Many People Walk

On Sidewalks,

But Not Me

Sometimes, when you take the coffee filter out of the plastic bag they sell them in, you get two by mistake and then you have to stuff the extra one back in the bag. Then, later, when you go to use the coffee filter you stuffed back in the bag, it's crumpled up, and it's harder to get it to sit in the basket right, so you risk the danger of getting coffee grounds in your coffee.

Slept badly last night.

This morning,

snow snarled traffic.

Parked the car

at Finch Station.

Took the train.

“I love you
from the depths
of my nucleus
accumbens.”
I told her.

She looked at me.

I looked at her.

There was nothing

going on that day

so I called up

my hairy friend

Nino for a chat,

but he claimed

to be too busy

to talk to me.

Carlo got a text from his son Merlin at 10:05 PM. *Go to bed*, it said.

Carlo texted back: *Your mom wants to watch another episode of The OC*. He stared down at his phone.

You're still watching The OC?! the next text said.

Three little dots were bubbling at the bottom of the message box, so Carlo waited.

The next message was a mad face. Then: *Stop watching that stupid show!*

By the time I look up from my toast, Kitty is gone. I sit down in one of the two chairs we keep at the kitchen table. I look across at the other chair, empty now that Kitty is gone. I know she isn't actually gone. She's still in the house somewhere. I can hear her. She's upstairs moving around in the bedroom.

There were some issues gathering at the edges, all around where we stood together in the middle of the room. I couldn't see them, but I could feel them, encroaching. *It's true what she always says, I thought, we really can't see the issues.* I turned my head, saw the empty space above the bed, then turned back to her to see what she might be able to see that I couldn't.

**There's a snow boulder in a
little clearing where the
snow has melted inward,
away from the banks piled up
by the driveways across the
street, and I believe it must
be what's left of the
snowman the little boy who
lives at #26 built right after
that last heavy snowfall.**

*Believe what you want,
I say to myself, almost
angrily, *it won't change
a thing.**

I spend the next three hours lying in bed, trying to determine if it's even possible to assign a tone to the little voice inside a person's head.

Out the window, I see a tree

that is dropping its leaves.

The leaves gather on the grass

below the tree, conspiring

together to make patterns

I will never in the entirety of

my life be able to decipher.

I get up

once again

and go over

to the window.

What time is it?

I ask myself.

For a while there,
I had no intention
of explaining anything
to anyone.

But it turns out
it might be me
who wants an
explanation.

I just don't want
you to ask me
for an explanation.

I want the explanation
to reveal itself in the
moment I stop trying
to explain.

Marilee's mother takes off her apron and goes out to the garden. This doesn't have to be so complicated, she tells herself.

My grandparents usually said nothing. They nodded a lot. It was like they had heard something once, heard someone say something they couldn't quite believe, and now they were listening to try to hear what they believed couldn't be heard so that they could prove for once and for all that it could never be heard.

Sometimes you can do things,
productive, useful things,
and still feel happy,
as if you were doing nothing at all.

I woke up naked on the front path.

I looked up to find Kitty

standing in the doorway

in a flannel nightie.

I was freezing,

so I scampered up the front steps,

trying to cover my business

with my hands

but kitty pointed away from the house,

sending me scurrying

back down the path

to retrieve the blanket

she'd thrown over me

sometime in the night.

There was a moment –

I don't know exactly

when it was, but it was

a single moment –

when I fell in love with Kitty,

and I've been in love with her ever since.

Where do you keep your
concord grapes? the
woman asked, rummaging
through the fridge.

While I sat at the table
stirring my soup,
a squirrel in the tree
outside the kitchen
window looked in
at me between bites
of the nut it was
holding in its paws.

**SHE WAS GETTING BETTER
AND BETTER AT PLAYING HER
CHORDS, UNTIL EVENTUALLY
MY WORST NIGHTMARE CAME
TRUE. SHE DIDN'T EXACTLY
SING. IT WAS MORE LIKE SHE
WAS SKETCHING OUT A LITTLE
MELODY THAT BARELY HELD
ITS SHAPE AS SHE STRETCHED
IT SHAKILY OVERTOP OF THE
ARPEGGIOS HER FINGERS WERE**

**PLUCKING OUT CLUMSILY
AMONG THE STRINGS OF HER
GUITAR. AND ALTHOUGH I MAY
NOT HAVE REALIZED IT AT THE
TIME, THE THREAT OF HER
SINGING HAD BEEN FESTERING
DEEP INSIDE ME LIKE AN
INFECTION FOR SO LONG THAT
I FOUND MYSELF WELCOMING
THE RELIEF OF FINALLY BEING
DONE WITH IT.**

You bad man, she said.

We laughed.

She shook out her wet hair.

Looked up at me.

You're a bad, bad man, she said.

This time I didn't laugh.

I was a bad man, and I knew it.

But at that moment,

I didn't really care.

She went upstairs

to blow dry her hair.

I wanted to open the fridge

and find something

I hadn't known

was going to be in there.

Open Could Be Equal To

The Space Around Us,

Don't You Agree?

The sky is a terrible tapestry
of raucous storm clouds.

I walk out the front door
and along the path to the
street, gathering bits of
weather in my jar as I go.
At lunch time, I rush back
into the house and laugh
when I see myself in the
hall mirror. I can hear the
horses out in the garage,
whinnying for more oats.

All the nothing a person does all day
becomes something else altogether
when the person does it in a restaurant.

I looked out the window and saw tippy recycle bins teetering on the edges of snowbanks, like mountain climbers perched precariously over driveways.

My own recycle bins were so carefully set out at the end of my driveway. It was like a call to create, and I almost went out and moved my bins into the snowbank that was melting into puddles in the mild March air.

I LOOKED OUT THE BACK
WINDOW AND SAW NOTHING.

I WENT ROUND
TO THE FRONT WINDOW

AND SAW NOTHING.

THERE WAS NOTHING TO SEE.

If I Have To Move, I Will