

Farting Around with Kurt Vonnegut

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“We are here on Earth to fart around.”

Yes, a quote about farting made my day, and then my week, around mid-September, summer’s end in Ireland. And if you’re like me, and often take life too seriously, I think it could help you too. It could shift your perspective, maybe even change your life. Alright, I know, ‘life-changing’ sounds like an exaggeration. I have an inner cynic too, and he’s protesting already: *How can a quote about farting be life-changing? You’re full of shit, man.* Well, inner cynic, why not? Oh, and by the way, man, you’re full of shit too. You’re Irish, why are you talking like an American? Who do you think you are, The Big Lebowski? Where’s the money, Lebowski? What the fuck am I talking about? Bad start, Bill. Ah well.

Oh, and for the rest of you . . . just bear with me . . .

Since I was a kid I’ve wanted to be a writer. I’ve always loved reading and writing, even if our relationship has been somewhat on and off over the years. In August 2023—after a summer spent reading and dreaming about the works of many of my favourite writers, including Jack Kerouac—we were very much on, and I announced to my parents that I was not going to go ahead with the Professional

Master of Education I was due to begin studying in September, and instead go on the road, work odd jobs, and write.

"You said *what?*?"

"You're trying to be like Jack Kerouac!!"

My parents were allergic to my vague and somewhat idealistic plan; they wanted me to become a secondary school teacher, have security, and write in my spare time. We had a few heated arguments, the exact details of which I won't divulge, because I'm so merciful.

But what I will say is this—after our arguments I fell into old patterns of self-doubt and self-betrayal. Suddenly I was afraid of the prospect of working odd jobs and writing, and the security of a teaching position seemed more attractive. I hushed my loud inner call to go on an unconventional path to a faint whisper, and instead listened to soundbites I was creating that promised me, with the glibness of a dishonest politician, that everything would turn out alright and easy if I became a secondary school teacher. In September I started studying the PME at UCC, which involved a year-long placement teaching position in a secondary school. Truthfully, if I had never argued with my parents I most likely would have gone ahead with the PME anyway, but we love having someone to blame, don't we?

I taught for the whole academic year, or, in a more accurate way of putting it, I subjected myself to seven months of self-torture! Okay, it wasn't all that bad, I learnt a lot about myself and I connected with students and staff. In my English class we discussed, through study of the novel *Stargirl*, the importance of staying true to oneself in the face of pressure to conform or contort oneself to be accepted. I was heartened when the novel resonated with some students, particularly passages where the main character decides to be who she is instead of who the world tells her to be. The deep irony was though, as the teacher and leader of the class, I was engaging in constant self-betrayal. I was repressing the truthful part of myself

who didn't want to be a secondary school teacher, and even though my body kept screaming at me to give up, I kept going because I felt I had something to prove.

I finished the year teaching, and in August of 2024 I took a leave of absence from the Professional Master of Education, deciding to be a writer instead. Then I moved down to Glenbeigh in Kerry to live in my parents' mobile home (thanks mom and dad), work in a restaurant, and write. I moved to Glenbeigh for various reasons, namely that it was my childhood haunt and holds a special place in my heart. I wanted to forget myself in the big blue dream of sea and sky in the West.

Overall, relocating to Kerry was a good move. The sights were stunning, and in August I enjoyed sea swims, long walks in nature, and reading and writing in the mobile home. I was feeling optimistic about the future, confident that I could create a life I loved, and I decided to apply for a Masters in Creative Writing through a teaching assistantship in the US.

But my time in Kerry was not without its challenges; soon after deciding to apply to study in the States, I got caught up in inner conflict. At times I was still enjoying what was in front of me in Glenbeigh. At other times I was distant and irritable. I became so fixated on the possibility of going to America, that I began to overlook the beauty and opportunity already around me. In fact, I began to romanticise my imagined future so much that I began to resent my reality. *Things are not okay here, but they'll be great, maybe even perfect, over there. And Jesus, aren't the people here so flawed, compared to those lovely and sweet people in idyllic, imagined, illusory there?*

Old patterns of self-criticism had returned, and I was projecting my criticisms onto the people of Glenbeigh. I was comparing myself to my friends all over the world, who had 'real jobs', while I was working in a restaurant. Somehow, distorted by my self-critical perception, working in a restaurant didn't seem like a . . . 'real job?'

I was also beating myself up for having no material success with my writing to date, and I questioned the purpose of continuing on the route I was on, if I was going to fail anyway. Worst of all, I speculated whether my decision to live in a glorified shack in a small town in the West and spend most of my free time writing was an excuse to flake out on the 'real world', whatever the fuck that means! I was talking myself out of tangible change. My ego was trying to steer me away from the strange scary sea of the unknown I had set sail on, back to the familiar shore of safety and security. But I knew better this time than to let doubts guide me. I just walked around grumpily sometimes when I was out and about, criticising locals in my mind.

On a run of the mill Tuesday in mid-September, I went to the library in Killorglin, near Glenbeigh to write. A few hours in, I wasn't happy with how I was writing. I promised myself I'd write for four hours straight, but I kept faltering, taking breaks to check my phone or just . . . fart around. Even when I was writing, I didn't feel connected to the work. I wasn't involved in it. The library was noisy, and I was starving. A fresh sourdough I had just bought was laying across my desk, taunting me, begging me to eat it. I refrained. *How can I make it as a starving artist, if I can't write while I'm starved!?*

I took a break and moseyed around the library. I began reading a play about Rimbaud. In the passage I read, Rimbaud takes part in a poetry contest in school against his classmates. All his classmates rush ahead to write their poems, but Rimbaud takes his time before starting, eating some bread with butter, to his classmates' bewilderment. Eventually he picks up the pen and writes something great, claiming the contest his own. Well, he was Rimbaud, even after he ate his bread and butter. Or maybe, especially when he ate his bread and butter. Or even, because he ate his bread and butter. I know you're probably thinking: *Is this story just about bread and butter?* No, it's not. But it kind of is. As I said, just bear with me . . .

I kept walking around the library. Two books caught my eye: *The Journals of Sylvia Plath* and *A Man Without a Country* by Kurt Vonnegut. I flicked through both and liked what I saw. I brought them home.

That evening (after I ate my sourdough), I regretfully decided that I wouldn't write, and instead I lay on the couch and read Vonnegut. It was the right choice. A few pages in I was laughing, another few pages in, goosebumps were running up and down my arms. Then I came to a few lines that really hit home:

If you want to really hurt your parents, and you don't have the nerve to be gay, the least you can do is go into the arts. I'm not kidding. The arts are not a way to make a living. They are a very human way of making life more bearable. Practicing an art, no matter how well or badly, is a way to make your soul grow, for heaven's sake. Sing in the shower. Dance to the radio. Tell stories. Write a poem to a friend, even a lousy poem. Do it as well as you possible can. You will get an enormous reward. You will have created something. (Vonnegut, 2005)

Suddenly it hit me—mom, dad . . . I'm ggg . . . goooing into the arts! No, wait, not that part. The part about practicing art for the love of doing it. Falling in love with the process, not the outcome, as they say. Looking back over the few weeks prior, while there were spells when I came alive while writing, overall, I had lost sight of what I love about it. My perspective had been distorted by the imagined notoriety, approval or security that I was hunting, that I imagined I might one day obtain, if my dreams came true. I was distracted by the outcome I wanted, not paying enough attention to the work I was doing.

It's not like I hadn't thought about any of this before reading Vonnegut. Ruyard Kiplings' line: "If you can dream—and not make

dreams your master," came to mind a few times, but I never let it settle, often forgetting that wisdom and rushing away from the present moment in pursuit of my goals. But Vonnegut's disarming style—his humor, his forthrightness, his tenderness—cut through my defences, and settled in.

I read another passage that resonated even more deeply. Vonnegut describes how he would often make a trip out of walking to the newsstand to buy an envelope and then to the post office to mail his writing to his typist. He recounts some simple, yet meaningful experiences he shares with beautiful people on one such trip. He closes the chapter with the lines: "How beautiful it is to get up and go out and do something. We are here on Earth to fart around, and don't let anybody tell you any different."

The chapter stopped me in my tracks. In the few weeks prior, I had shared many meaningful, even if fleeting, experiences with other people. But they never felt like they were enough. I'd quickly forget, or even dismiss them, moving on to my next future hurdle, or my next complaint about how things could be better. I reflected—*Do I really want to miss out on my life that is happening right now, waiting on some possible future success, that might never arrive?*

Plus, taking things so seriously and obsessing over an outcome is no help in making art. Look at Vonnegut, talking about farting around and singing in the shower. And he wrote one of the greatest novels of the twentieth century. Sure, he did a lot more than fart around in the end, but one can't deny that his lightheartedness was integral to his work and his spirit as an artist. Reading his memoir, I sensed that Vonnegut knew how to appreciate his life for what it was while facing the uncertainty of a career in literature. It took him twenty-three years to write *Slaughterhouse Five*. Can you imagine how many trips to the newsagents, post office, and other such places he took on his way there? And what would have become of him as a

writer if he hadn't opened his heart to each step? It's like Rimbaud with his bread and butter.

I lay on my couch that evening, with Vonnegut's book in my hands, and I promised myself that the next day I'd pay more attention to my life as it was, and the simple moments of beauty I was sure to experience.

I woke up the next morning, with familiar self-critical thoughts circulating. *Why did I say that to that person yesterday? Could I not have just said it this way? Do they think I'm strange? Boring?* My bedroom became a very small place.

I remembered what I read the night before: "We are here on Earth to fart around, and don't let anybody tell you any different." I chuckled to myself, picturing Kurt Vonnegut's amusing, smiling face, the self-proclaimed reptile. No, not one of the reptilian lizard people who supposedly rule the world and wear the skin of dead babies, he just had very wrinkly skin in his old age and once joked that he looked like an iguana. I rose from my bed, changed, and headed for the beach, with a gentle intention of . . . farting around (*C'mon Bill you've overcooked that term already, she's done, finito, dusht, let her goooo*). No, wait, I'm not finished . . .!

RTÉ lyric in the car. Marty Whelan was away, but Simon Delaney was doing a good job filling in. The classical music sounded good. I was fucking freezing though. It was 10°C, wet and grey. It was still only September. Winter comes fast in Ireland, for fuck's sake.

Outside of the car, by the beach, I was even colder, and negative thoughts were still circulating. Fuck it, sure they're only thoughts. Just . . . *fart around* now (ya see).

I walked. I enjoyed the crunch of stone under my feet. There was a low-hanging fog concealing the bulk of the mountains nearby, but underneath it I could see the dense green Glenbeigh Fairy Forest and the mossy, rusty base of mountains. Birds were gliding up and down,

landing in some perch for a while and then taking off again. The marshy reeds were atmospheric, especially with the low-hanging fog. I felt like I was in the midst of some story. The sea was, of course, the sea—wonderful and blue. I could never tire looking at it. The coastal air brushed against my face, crisp and salty. I skimmed a few stones. I watched as waves rose up and fell down like deep, calm breaths. Then I returned to my car.

Just outside of my car, I stopped for a while, to keep looking. I noticed an English Springer Spaniel running enthusiastically nearby, and an old man trailing behind him. The spaniel had a white and brown coat, and not a care in the world. I think he must be the most beautiful dog I've ever seen. The old man following the dog shot his arm up in the air, and waved at me. I waved back. *People wave at each other a lot down here, It's nice.* As the man walked on, I paid closer attention to his gait. He was hobbling a little. His body must have been stiff, probably sore. I thanked Life for my youth, and for my legs.

Back in the car the classical music hummed like a hymn straight from the heavens. Driving away from the beach, I started thinking about my grandad. He was from Kerry, and he's the reason I have a connection with Glenbeigh in the first place. Wouldn't it be great if he never got sick and died? We could have worked out in the fields, then enjoyed tea and scones, and he could have given me advice. My dad would have loved that. Ah well, my grandad did a lot of living when he was alive, I reminded myself. Then I thought about all the living I still wanted to do.

Driving over the bridge into Glenbeigh town, a man wearing a grey poncho was waiting on the other side, crouched down, holding his greyhound by the collar. As soon as I pass over the bridge, the man unleashed his dog's lead, and the greyhound bounded over the bridge ahead of him, free, no constraint.

The man beamed at me, and I beamed back at him. We relaxed into

it—the magic of a moment. I drove on, and I thought to myself: *I'll be alright, you know. I'm just here to fart around.*

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Seven months later, and I am currently living back at home with my parents in Cork city, working odd jobs, and writing (I dropped out of the PME). I have self-published essays on Substack and people have been very supportive, especially my parents, who are my biggest (only?) fans. *Noooo, don't make a joke about only fans!!!* Honestly though one of the most rewarding things about my journey from secondary school teaching to where I am now has been realising just how much my parents are rooting for me. I still take myself too seriously, or lose track of the present moment at times, worrying about how to earn validation for my work, or how I will fare throughout the rest of adulthood. But I still believe I can create the life I want to live rather than the one that I think is expected of me. Incidentally, right now I want a steady job that I like. Writing and creating are still my North Star, and one of the best ways I know of returning to and enjoying the present moment is opening myself up to receive the sacredness of what is around me, and then taking a pen in my hand to transmit this sacredness into words. Revising this piece for the Quarryman has been a real eye-opener, to the beauty of life in Cork city, and the joy of working on something I love.

I guess you could say I'm still farting around.