

WE NEED TO TALK

Artie never thought his wife was listening to him.

"You never listen to me," he told her.

His wife was called June.

"I'm listening to you now, aren't I?" she replied.

"Now you are, yeah," said Artie. "Because I said you weren't listening, so you listened."

"That doesn't make any sense," June said, and went back to her TV show.

Artie and June had been married for six or maybe seven years; he had it written down somewhere. In the early days, he could swear she hung on his every word.

"Oh Artie," he definitely remembered her saying one time, "You're so funny. The things you say!"

Artie couldn't remember the specific thing he had said or if it was funny, but for sure he remembered June saying it.

Then one day, which day it doesn't matter, Artie said to June:

"Honey? Are you going to be home this morning? Because I have a package being delivered and I have to go out."

"Uh huh," said June, without looking up from her magazine, "Sure."

So Artie went out, and when he came back there was no June and no package.

"You never mentioned a package to me," June said.

Artie said nothing. He thought it was easier that way.

After that, it seemed to Artie that more and more June wasn't listening to him. He might point out the window when June was driving and "Hey, there's a new Dairy Queen where the old library used to be," and a few days later she'd say, "You know the old library? It's a Dairy Queen now."

Or he'd say, "I ran into the Grosses in town today. They cut short their vacation."

"Uh huh," June would say, and then two days later it would be: "Why didn't you tell me the Grosses came back already?"

It was pointless to say anything. Why say anything, anyway, when what you wanted to say was, "You never listen"?

Soon Artie began to feel a little isolated. He was due for retirement, which meant he was the oldest guy in the office, which also meant everyone ignored him and talked to people their own age. They hadn't had kids and most of the friends he had were dead or deaf. There was pretty much only June, and she was more interested in her own friends, who were quite spry considering, and had a lot going on for them. Artie could understand why June liked to spend time with her friends instead of, for example, him. She'd just got into some French thing called petanque, and played once a week with a bunch of ladies who went for lunch afterwards. Lunch seemed to involve a little bit of wine and a lot of talking.

On petanque day, Artie went and sat in the yard. The yard wasn't much – a tree, some grass and an old lawnchair – but when he was there he could just sit

and think. Sometimes he talked to himself – it was like the man said, the conversation might be predictable but at least he was listening to someone who wanted to talk to him, as well as talking to a good listener.

Artie also found that sitting in the yard he spent a lot of time looking at the house. It was a good house, maybe a little big for them, a touch rundown, and Artie found himself imagining what kind of house he'd really liked to live in. A nice little house, square-shaped. Blue, maybe, with a red door. Windows with neatly-tied curtains in them. A porch, with flowers planted in front. The kind of house two people could be happy in.

One day Artie was talking and June, he was sure, was not listening. She had on the TV and a puzzle book on her knee. Artie was telling her something that was not very interesting even to him, but he just felt like talking to someone.

"Uh huh," said June, and nodded, it seemed to Artie a little abruptly, as if to say, "Hurry up, I have puzzles to do." Of course, he could have been wrong. June could have been listening, she could have been half-listening and nodding as if to say, "Keep going, Artie, I'm listening." But tonight it just struck him that he could have been saying anything and she would have nodded and said, "Uh huh."

Yeah, Artie thought. I could say anything. Anything at all.

He opened his mouth and before he could stop himself, he heard his own voice speak.

"I drove past the house today," Artie said, then shut up. *What?* he thought. *What house?*

June didn't say, "What house?" She said, "Uh huh."

Artie was a little scared, as if he'd gone too far. He got up, yawned, and said, "I think I'll go on up to bed."

"All right, dear," said June, "I'll be with you in a while."

A couple of days later, Artie and June were having coffee at the Dairy Queen when Artie looked at June and said, "You know, it might snow at the weekend."

June said nothing. She was looking out the window.

"I said it might snow," Artie repeated.

June said nothing, and Artie felt a tiny match of anger flare inside him.

"The house is nearly built," Artie said. "They're just fitting the window frames."

"OK," said June.

Over the next few weeks, Artie found he was mentioning the house more and more often. Sometimes he didn't even check to see if June was listening to him or not, but go right on and say, "The house looks great" or "They've got curtains up in all the windows." It didn't matter. June would just nod, or grunt, or say nothing. She looked tired these days, but who didn't, Artie thought, we're all getting older, aren't we?

Then one night Artie and June were in bed reading and Artie put down his book and said, "June, there's something I need to say."

June said nothing, just sat in silence, book in hand.

"Sometimes I don't think you hear me anymore," said Artie.

June said nothing again.

“And June,” said Artie, “I feel bad, because – “
June’s head tipped onto Artie’s shoulder. He patted her leg.
The book fell from June’s hands.
“June,” said Artie.
But June was dead.

The funeral was a big deal. June had a lot of friends, and former workmates, and quite a lot of living relatives.

Artie spoke at the service but he couldn’t remember a thing that he’d said. Afterwards several people stopped to tell him what a great woman June was.

“I know,” was all Artie could say. He felt terrible, and not just because June was gone.

Months went by. Artie sat in the house, looking at June’s puzzle books. They were mostly completed, thick black lines around wordsearch clues. Her shows were still piling up on the TV recording device, but he hadn’t the heart to delete them.

Sometimes Artie sat in the yard, in the old lawnchair, just looking at the house they’d lived in together.

One night Artie went to bed, slept the best he’d slept for years, and when he woke up, he found the house filled with light.

He got up and went downstairs. The road outside the house was glittering like it was made of quartz and mica, so he followed it.

He must have walked for miles because when he looked up, he was in a green field with a little hill in it. Atop the hill was a house. A little square house, blue, with a red door. There were neat little curtains in the windows.

Artie walked up to the house. Someone was sitting on a lawnchair in the porch. It was June.

Artie reached out his hands to her. June folded her arms.

“Artie,” she said, “We need to talk.”

