

A Fly for Oscar

By Jim Elliff



James, the youth: "There is no such thing as a trivial death."

The poet and sage, the older Mr. Brockton: "No, but there are trivial men who die. I will illustrate this, though you will not like my illustration. The story goes this way:

"Oscar Felton was dying. Everyone knew it. Oscar knew it better than anyone else. He would die and go to hell—that was unquestioned. It wasn't that Oscar was such a bad fellow to be around, but that he totally dismissed God as unreachable therefore irrelevant. That was the end of it. No more discussion was to be had.

"Oscar's last day was not announced by the doctors or nurses. Ruby Felton tried to keep up the endless chitchat which she had perfected over the years throughout Oscar's final hours—little tidbits from the paper, a question or two about the crossword puzzle, something about needing to seed the yard. Oscar would never seed the yard. He knew it; she knew it. The talk did not have to mean anything. Ruby excelled in meaningless jabber.

"The fly that entered the room had no knowledge that he would play such a significant part in the occasion. His peskiness was in his persistent sortie from the window at the opening of the curtains to Oscar's gaping mouth and back again. On the window he buzzed about frantically with that irritating "ZZZZZZZZL...ZZZZL...ZZZZZZZZZZ" that stopped and started and stopped and started. Ruby tried more than once to swat the fly with her newspaper. But when she tried she only succeeded in sending the fly to his other port, Oscar's open mouth.

"Oscar's mouth was open because in the last few days a tube had been placed in it to aid his breathing. His lips were parched and his breath was uninviting, to say the least. With no disrespect, such breath is exactly what flies like. So, with unflinching accuracy, the fly landed on the dual landing strip of Oscar's lips and walked about them soaking in the attractive smell. Ruby understandably refused to swat the fly while he was on Oscar's lips and Oscar had no strength to shoo him away. She would, however, get up and wave the paper above his face a few times until the fly would return to the window to soak in the rays and "zzzzzz" around some more. This was a troublesome task for Ruby, but what would you expect of so faithful a wife of so many years? Finally Ruby tired of getting up to shoo the fly or to swat at it in the window. Oscar had worse things to put up with and perhaps did not even feel the fly on his parched lips, she reasoned.

"Oscar did feel the fly tickle his lips. But he could not talk nor could he gesture. With no recourse available to dominate the fly, Oscar gave up. He did, however, concentrate upon the fly as it made its rounds. The circumnavigation of that fly filled every moment of an hour and a half of his life—and then he died. He died thinking of a fly."

"He had planned a more noble exit from the earth. At one time he had imagined that in his last hours he would finally reckon with God, tie up the loose ends, do something that would absolve him of at least his more notorious sins. He had at least imagined that he would be surrounded by a loving family as he breathed his last breath, saying something memorable so as not to be forgotten. But the son and daughter would neither one be in the hospital room until after work. Ruby had dutifully scratched on her crossword puzzle through the eventful moment—not intentionally, of course, but because she did not know that the moment had actually come. Had she known that the moment had arrived she would have tried at that very moment to say all those words of appreciation she had planned to say just before he died. But this fly had taken center stage until the last moment and that was it. Oscar went to hell with the fly on his lips and there was nothing that could be done about it. And that is the story."

James: I don't like this story. My own father died with parched lips and a breathing tube. It's profane to speak of such things because it brings uncomfortable memories to those of us who have lost our family members and friends. I'm repulsed by it.

Brockton: I also am repulsed and more disturbed by it than you know, but I have spoken truth, and the truth will guide you. We may all die with parched lips in some hospital. What is sad is not the parched lips, but the man. The condition of a man's lips during such a time is a common reality we must all accept as we journey from the first hospital to the last. The man is the problem, not the lips. He lived for little things.

James: What is this fly?

Brockton: The fly is a metaphor for all that is little. He goes out into eternity with little things on his mind because he always had little things on his mind and on his lips. His death is an extension of his life; his eternal state is the result. And his wife is no different.

James: But is it a foregone conclusion that Oscar lived for little things? Couldn't it be that he lived for noble causes and then, not knowing that his hour had come, he focused on the nagging fly?

Brockton: It is not possible. Everything is little when God is dismissed. Everything is a disconnected flitting of flies. Oscar dismissed God as irrelevant and in doing so gave his mind over to the flies. It is not that I make fun of the man, as you are imagining, but that I let the man reveal his own foolishness.

James: Then it is true. There is no such thing as a trivial death, but there are trivial men who die.

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