

Hello Again

by Alexander Carver

“Mom, if that’s you, I want you to buzz into my right ear. Did you hear me, Mom? My *right* ear.”

I had just filled the gas tank to my rental car, a Ford something or other, and was surprised to find that the same little black-eyed fly that appeared inside the SUV the day of Mom’s funeral had survived the cold November night to pay me another visit. I was driving through the West Chester countryside, about a mile from Wellington, the retirement village where my parents had recently surrendered to senior living. A few moments after I’d spoken to the fly, it lifted from its sunlit perch on the dashboard, zigzagged around the inside of the car, and landed on my stubbly right cheek. I then watched in the rearview mirror in amazement as it took the short hop through the air to grant my wish and buzz into my right ear. At that fifty-mile-an-hour moment, I was fortunate that the white, French Chateau-styled buildings of Wellington appeared in the windshield, preventing my shock and delight from endangering myself and other drivers.

I swerved into the visitor’s parking lot and searched for a space that faced away from the front entrance and any eyes I preferred not to witness my unusual behavior. I parked between two sedans, checked to see if anyone was lounging in either one, and made a second request of the fly...

“Okay, Mom, this one might be a little tougher...if that’s really you, I want you to kiss me right on the mouth,” I said, eyeing my crazed expression in the rearview mirror as I puckered my lips in preparation for a landing. Again, the circling fly chose to alight on the right side of my face. It then strutted a few itchy inches across my salt and pepper whiskers over to my chin. “Come on, Mom. You can do it. Go ahead. Give me a kiss.” I blew air out of my mouth to further attract the fly, and with that it flew off my chin and landed on my bottom lip. Giggling to myself as I continued to observe the minor miracle, I made a kissing sound to complete the act of affection. Startled by the sound, the fly flew

off and dropped below the steering wheel to the back of my right hand, where it sat for a moment as if worn out by its mission.

As the fly rested and my heart raced, I scanned the parking lot again. Anyone watching me would think I was talking to myself, and any of the residents at Wellington who knew me would think it was the grief doing all the talking. But, come on! What in the world was going on? What I'd just experienced felt surreal. But it had happened. I was not high or drunk or even overly caffeinated, making requests of a fly and then watching as the fly granted my requests with little delay and athletic-like precision. Even if the fly wasn't my resurrected mother, it was, at the very least, a fly with an extraordinary grasp of the English language.

Concluding that my grieving mind was playing tricks on me, I decided to test the fly a third time. "Hey, Mom? I don't want to get greedy, but can I please have another kiss?" Then I made the same rhythmic puffing sound Mom always made while working around the house and trying to relieve whatever stresses my sister Annie and I had dealt her. The breathing exercise she incorporated was a faster paced version of the one that women use in labor, and maybe Mom had thought, *Well, if it worked for birthing two ungrateful kids, it'll certainly work for everyday household stresses*. On one occasion, when I was a bit moody, I reacted to it by saying, "Mom, you're breathing funny again."

The fly granted my wish a third time and landed on my lips, not once, but several more times, the blowing sensation seeming to give it a little thrill.

"Hello again, Mom. It's good to have you back."

My mother had passed away five days earlier while lying peacefully in her hospital bed as I ran my hand through her hair, Dad held her right hand, and Annie held her left. She had been plagued by unanswered health questions for over a year, including a small stroke that affected her speech for a while, and she wouldn't be diagnosed with T-cell lymphoma until after she was gone. That's how quickly we lost her. T-cell lymphoma is the trojan horse of cancers—difficult to detect until it has taken full command of your body. One of her too many doctors had ushered us into a hideously upholstered sitting room and told us Mom was going to die. It was just like one of those scenes in a movie—only this time Dad, Annie, and I were forced to play the parts of the blindsided and shattered

loved ones. As good a team as any family, we went to work fulfilling Mom's wishes of getting her out of bad situation as quickly as we could and asked the doctors to remove the breathing mask she hated so much...a decision that would dwindle all the years of her wonderful life down to its final hour. During those last precious, gut-wrenching moments, we invited family members to call and say goodbye as I held a cellphone to Mom's ear. The sudden, unrehearsed goodbyes were followed by an impromptu Neil Diamond concert...culminating with Mom going out to an encore of her favorite song, *Hello Again*.

Seated in the parking lot of the last place she called home, desperate to have my mother and best friend back, I began to believe that she had returned to me as a fly to share the secret she had learned that there was indeed life after death. Ironically, Mom was terrified of flying. At the time of her death she had not taken to the skies in over fifty years—since an airplane carrying her home from a vacation to Bermuda had flown into the jaws of a severe thunderstorm. Repeating the story frequently over the years, Mom would tell us that the “stewardesses” were strapped into their seats with faces “white as sheets.” She also said, somewhat less convincingly, that she saw a bolt of lightning streak down the aisle of the plane. A week after returning from the trip, as she was hanging our colorful 1970's fashions on the clothesline in the backyard of our little house in Radnor, tears ran down her face as she watched an airplane fly overhead, and she vowed never to set foot on a plane again. She never did.

And so, it appeared that not only was Mom trying to communicate her love from the other side, but her sense of humor as well. Being reincarnated in winged form was the last thing any of us ever expected from her. But I guess if she wanted to ride around with me and Dad as we travelled from town to town settling her affairs, it made sense that she would need to transform herself into something as subtle as a fly. A bird or a cat suddenly appearing inside the car and refusing to leave would certainly have created a different impact.

My wife Eva, a second daughter to Mom and her favorite late-night dance partner, later reminded me that on Friday afternoon when we drove to the cemetery for Mom's burial near the charming little town of Topton where she grew up, a bee had made a brief buzzing and bouncing appearance against the driver's side window. With our two-year-

old daughter Isabella holding court in the backseat, we all panicked a bit before lowering the windows to set the bee and our fear free.

“My guess is that your mom, being new to her powers, had a bit of a test fail as a bee, and then tried it again more successfully as a fly,” Eva said.

We laughed, while simultaneously believing that this was likely what had happened...Mom learning on the fly.

“Or maybe she was mad about what someone said at her memorial service, and she wanted to sting the culprit,” I said, knowing my mother better than she did.

“What would she have been mad about?” Eva asked.

“The joke I made that got the big laugh,” I said.

“Which joke?”

“Remember when the minister said, ‘I’m sure Winnie wasn’t a saint—she must have had *some* flaws...’ and I yelled out: ‘About 60/40!’”

“Oh, yeah, that *was* funny,” Eva said.

“Yeah, well, maybe Mom didn’t think so.”

“I’m sure she thought it was funny. She always loved it when you made fun of her.”

Eva was the first person I confided in about the possibility of Mom’s reappearance. She’s the most spiritual person I know. Spiritual, but not religious, humbly believing that anything was possible in this maddeningly incomprehensible universe, but nothing was known for sure—and to think otherwise and claim to know all the answers was nothing but pure ego. We both belief in the theory that “God didn’t create man in *His* image—man created God in *their* image.” So, I knew Eva would welcome the idea that her mother-in-law was still roaming around our little universe, gleefully creating a bit of mischief to distract us from our pain—her body buried below; her soul soaring above.

“Well, of course the fly is Winnie,” Eva said when I relayed the details to her after Mom’s appearance in the car. “And I think you’re right. She came back with wings to be funny. If she has superior powers, don’t you think she’d have a superior sense of humor, too? I think she wants you to know that all her fears are gone. What’s been happening to you is beautiful, Andy. Your Mom’s sharing the secrets of the universe with you. So, please do us all a favor and keep your eyes wide open.”

“But why does she have to be so subtle about it?” I asked. “Why can’t she just appear in the front seat next to me as herself and tell me everything she knows? Why all the mystery?”

“I don’t know. Maybe God, or the creators, or whoever’s running the show will only allow her to send you these little clues,” Eva said. “I mean, think of it this way, if she came back as Winnie and just blurted everything out, she’d be blowing it for everyone else.”

“Well, I guess that’s a good point,” I conceded. “Okay, I’ll take whatever I can get.”

Obviously, I had confided in the right person. I was worried that if I told Dad and Annie about the “happening,” they might have encouraged me to adopt a less spiritual and holistic approach in favor of a more therapeutic and medicated one.

Before the fly rematerialized that Saturday, I had driven Eva and Izzy to the Philadelphia airport—all of us deciding that they should spend Thanksgiving with Eva’s parents in Tucson as originally planned before Mom’s sudden death. Emotional adults and emotional toddlers don’t mix well, and as much as I needed my girls by my side during the saddest days of my life, Dad needed me by his side more, so I stayed on at Wellington until after Thanksgiving.

On Monday afternoon, Dad and I drove back into the city for a dental appointment he and Mom had been scheduled to endure together. As we traveled the wooded backroads of sun and shade-streaked suburbia, the fly appeared again—this time conveying a fawning preoccupation with the handsome, white-haired gentleman in tortoiseshell glasses riding shotgun. By that point the fly had survived three cold nights in the car, and I decided it was time to reveal my suspicion about its identity to Dad—a complicated introduction I chose to tackle in a comedic, singsong delivery, so as not to upset or offend my grieving father. My reasons for telling him were twofold: firstly, I wanted him to share my optimism that Mom still existed somewhere somehow, and secondly for the more practical reason that I feared he might take a swat at the fly if it landed on him. Because, let’s face it, who would the fly be more inclined to land on than her beloved husband of fifty-four years? As crazy as it sounds, I couldn’t take the thought of losing Mom twice in one week.

“Well, isn’t that something?” Dad said with his signature “he-he-he” chuckle of delight, after I told him about the great fly completing my gauntlet of requests. “I was curious if it was the same fly from the other day.”

“Isn’t it wild? I asked it to buzz into my right ear and it did! If it had buzzed into my left ear all bets would be off...”

Stoically seated beside me, Dad had become fixated with the fly, studying it as it moved excitedly back and forth between us. His belief was instantaneous. Mine had taken a while. But, of course, it had taken the fly a while to prove itself.

“It’s funny, because I remember your mother standing on the bed one night up on Cape Cod trying to kill a fly on the ceiling,” Dad said. “Her reflexes were incredible. She swung a flyswatter like Mike Schmidt swung a bat.”

“She hated flies, and she hated flying. That’s what makes it such a great practical joke,” I said.

“Well, I wouldn’t put any of it past her,” Dad said with another chuckle.

“Me either. Did you hear that, Mom? We’re impressed. We can’t wait to see what you have in store for us next,” I said to the fly as it danced past my head and into the backseat.

When we parked outside the dentist’s office, I decided to test the fly again by purposely leaving the driver’s side door wide open as I swung around to help Dad out of the car. I was curious to see if our little hitchhiker would seize the opportunity to escape if given ample time and two exit routes. After Dad was safely situated on the sidewalk with cane in hand, I closed his door and took my time walking back around to the open driver’s side door. I then watched for a breathless moment as the fly flew out the door into the open air, hovered over the rooftop, and flew right back inside the car.

“Dad! Dad! The fly flew out of the car, changed its mind, and flew right back inside!”

“She wants to stay with us!” he yelled, pumping his cane skyward.

“Okay, Mom, we’ll see you in about an hour. Hey—look on the bright side, at least you got out of going to the dentist.”

As the days before Thanksgiving passed and the fly stayed put, we began to address it familiarly as “Mom” and “Winnie” and even “Tinkerbelle”—treating it like a passenger of honor inside the rental car. I guarantee that no fly in the history of civilization

has ever been afforded more love and respect. Certainly not any that ever flew into Mom's bedroom that's for sure. While out and about, driving to lunch or dinner, or wherever our grief took us, we began to cater to Mom's musical preferences as well. We had played Neil Diamond's *Hello Again* for Mom at the hospital, and Eva performed it on the piano in the little stone church at the funeral, and now I was cranking it up everywhere we went. To us it had become the saddest song ever written. But we didn't mind, we were leaning into the pain to celebrate Mom's life and loves. We played all her favorite tunes by Neil Diamond, Billy Joel, George Gershwin, Cole Porter—even the one hit wonder she loved from the 1980's, *The Safety Dance*. “*We can dance if we want to, we can leave your friends behind, ‘cause your friends don’t dance, and if they don’t dance, well they’re no friends of mine.*”

Mom's favorite form of expression was dancing, and she loved every song with dance in its title or dance in its theme. *Flash Dance*, *I Wanna Dance with Somebody*, *All She Wants to Do is Dance*, *Shut Up and Dance*... Several years ago, I recorded a video of her dancing in a motel room to the song *Viva La Vida* by Coldplay—rubbing up against Dad to try and seduce him out of a trance cast on him by a salacious biography about Meghan and Harry. We had just arrived on her beloved Cape Cod for our favorite week of the year, and Mom was gloriously drunk on margaritas and physical expression. The video reveals a woman in her eighties dancing like a woman in her twenties, using all four corners of the motel room as her dance floor. Watching the footage, it's impossible to think I could've captured her in a freer and happier state of being. In her favorite place, surrounded by her favorite people, drunk from her favorite cocktail, engaged in her favorite activity... A perfect moment. Viva La Vida. Long live life.

As my faith in the fly grew, I began to worry about what would happen to it when I had to return the rental car to Hertz and board a plane back to Los Angeles. On Thanksgiving morning at Wellington, the fly appeared again as I was holding the passenger door open for Dad and assisting him as he plopped onto the front seat—the way older people do by letting gravity do all the work. As Dad was coming in for a landing, I watched as the fly suddenly flew underneath him, and instead of shooing the fly away like a sane person, I reacted by pushing Dad out of its path, back out onto the pavement.

So, basically what happened was I almost killed Dad to save Mom...in fly form. When I told him what I'd done and why I'd done it, Dad quipped: "Stop playing favorites."

A moment later, I watched again in frozen silence as the fly flew out of the car, flew back inside...outside again...and inside one more time for good. A neurotic showing of indecisiveness typical of Mom, which made me wonder if she was as baffled as we were about what she was still doing hanging out with us mere mortals inside a rental car in West Chester, Pennsylvania when she could be anywhere else doing anything else in the vast universe. Soaring over the Cape Cod Bay in upgraded seagull form perhaps. When the fly flew back into the car the second time, I quickly slammed Dad's door shut, then slipped inside the car on the driver's side, leaving only a slim and short pathway for escape. After five days, my desire to have the fly remain with us had become an obsession, and its status had changed from willing passenger to wavering captive.

In Tucson, away from the entomological miracle, Eva had feared I might discover the fly dead on the front seat of the car and suggested that I feed it water and a little snack. I brought it Mom's favorites: a Starbuck's mocha Frappuccino and a Martin's pretzel—clicking open the top of the bottle and crushing the pretzel into several more easily consumed pieces and crumbs. I then placed the snack in the twin cupholders between the front seats where I could best monitor any feasting should Mom's tastes in fly form imitate her tastes in human form.

"This will have to serve as Mom's Thanksgiving dinner," I told Dad, keeping him in the (loopy) loop, as we set out to spend the day with my sister and her family in the country.

"I'm sure she'll appreciate the gesture," Dad said, eyeing the open bottle and salty pretzel as if the act of placing them there was the most natural thing in the world. To me it felt like something a grieving child might do, and maybe that's exactly what I had become.

As we drove to Ephrata, there was another interaction with the fly that was perhaps the most remarkable in the miracle of its improbability. While stopped at a stoplight out in the farmlands, close to where our turkey was cooking, the fly touched down on the steering wheel beside my right hand. Then, with my left hand, I slowly reached toward it and gave it several pets with my index finger. It didn't react. It didn't move. It remained

right there on the steering wheel. How about that? A fly allowing a human being to touch it repeatedly without flying away? I had known household pets that wouldn't allow you to pet them. But a fly with that kind of poise and patience? That kind of tameness? It was impossible to believe. To me it was the truest test of its divinity. How else can you explain that moment at the stoplight?

That afternoon we had an elaborate Thanksgiving dinner with twenty-seven people in a barn that had once been used for manufacturing cannonballs during the Civil War. The excitement of all the people we knew and didn't know, and all the exotic food and red wine, was a pleasant diversion for our strong and brave but deeply wounded father. I had booked an eight o'clock flight that night to save money and beat the post-Thanksgiving rush, and the plan was for me to hand Dad off to my sister, so he could stay overnight at her house in Lancaster and put off for one more day his first night alone without his bride. Mom would have loved the homemade crab bisque—so I'll blame her for my eating two bowls of it before starting in on the turkey. But it was during dessert that she made her presence known in the final magical moment we witnessed with the fly. After I gave Dad—looking dashing in a tweed blazer and blue striped tie—a hug goodbye, Annie noticed that the same species of fly that had been inside the rental car all week was now buzzing around Dad's hand as he feasted on slices of pumpkin and pecan pie loaded with whipped cream.

"Oh my God! The fly's here!" Annie yelled, pointing at it. "Look, it's Mom, and she's letting us know that she'll be watching over Dad..."

To the three of us believers, it appeared that the fly had escaped the rental car and found its way across a half-acre of land up to the barn to join us for Thanksgiving dinner. When I returned to the rental car to head to the airport, the fly was nowhere to be found, and I was convinced that Mom had chosen to stay with Dad instead of braving the cross-continental flight in coach with me. A tricky journey even for an angel in disguise.

These days, looking back at that sad week in November, Mom's passing, the fly's presence, and all that I experienced with Dad, I can't help but question what I witnessed, as I weigh the miracles I'd seen against some of the more practical aspects of what had happened. The fly survived five nights inside a car under freezing conditions despite the

fact that, according to Google, any temperature below 45 degrees would surely spell its doom.

But... I also must confess that on the day of the funeral, my parents' youngest grandson James brought all of us homemade doughnuts from Lancaster to eat in the car as we traveled from the Presbyterian church to the cemetery. The doughnuts were covered in sugar and the sugar got all over the backseat of the car when little Izzy was treated to a glazed one of her own. So, it is possible that the fly braved five consecutive nights inside the car and chose not to fly away for the love of sugar and not for the love of a grieving family. And it is also possible that the fly, having never felt the vibrations of love and affection like that—under the misconception that it was my mother—was attracted to our love like it would be to lamplight in the dark.

Regardless of whether it was my mother or just a genius of a fly, there are a couple things I now know for sure...I believe in an afterlife. Wholeheartedly. And I will never kill another fly. And isn't that, alone, extraordinary? My experience with that fly, whether real or simply a remarkable linking of occurrences and coincidences, has changed me and my beliefs, and I have the spirit of my beautiful Mom to thank for it. Long live life. Long live love.



Alexander and Winnie

Alexander Carver's debut novel *O Jackie!* was published by J. New Books Press. His short stories, plays, and poems have appeared in *ZYZZYVA*, *Foliate Oak*, *The Satirist*, *The Writing Disorder*, *Wingless Dreamer*, and *WILDsound*. A story, "Uber Trouble," was a prize winner in the *Razor Literary Magazine* short fiction contest. As well as being an author and playwright, he is an award-winning screenwriter/director. He lives with his wife Elise and daughter Elixandra in Redondo Beach, California.