

Licked
by Paul Jennings

Tomorrow when Dad calms down I'll own up. Tell him the truth. He might laugh. He might cry. He might strangle me. But I have to put him out of his misery.

I like my dad. He takes me fishing. He arm-wrestles with me in front of the fire on cold nights. He plays Scrabble instead of watching the news. He tries practical jokes on me. And he keeps his promises. Always.

But he has two faults. Bad faults. One has to do with flies. He can't stand them. If there's a fly in the room he has to kill it. He won't use fly spray because of the ozone layer, so he chases them with a fly swatter. He races around the house swiping and swatting like a mad thing. He won't stop until the fly is flat. Squashed. Squished – sometimes still squirming on the end of the fly swatter.

He's a deadeye shot. He hardly ever misses. When his old fly swatter was almost worn out I bought him a nice new yellow one for his birthday. It wasn't yellow for long. It soon had bits of fly smeared all over it.

It's funny the different colors that squashed flies have inside them. Mostly it is black or brown. But often there are streaks of runny red stuff and sometimes bits of blue. The wings flash like diamonds if you hold them up to the light. But mostly the wings fall off unless they are stuck to the swatter with a bit of squashed innards.

Chasing flies is Dad's first fault. His second one is table manners. He is mad about manners.

And it is always my manners that are the matter.

“Andrew,” he says, “don't put your elbows on the table.”

“Don't talk with your mouth full.”

“Don’t lick your fingers.”

“Don’t dunk your cookie in the coffee.”

This is the way he goes on every mealtime. He has a thing about flies and a thing about manners.

Anyway, to get back to the story. One day Dad is peeling the potatoes for dinner. I am looking for my fifty cents that rolled under the table about a week ago. Mum is cutting up the cabbage and talking to Dad. They do not know that I am there. It is a very important meal because Dad’s boss, Mr. Spinks, is coming for dinner. Dad never stops going on about my manners when someone comes for dinner.

“You should stop picking on Andrew at dinnertime,” says Mum.

“I don’t,” says Dad.

“Yes you do,” says Mum. “It’s always don’t do this, don’t do that. You’ll give the boy a complex.”

I have never heard of a complex before, but I guess that it is something awful like pimples.

“Tonight,” says Mum, “I want you to go for the whole meal without telling Andrew off once.”

“Easy,” says Dad.

“Try hard,” says Mum. “Promise me that you won’t get cross with him.”

Dad looks at her for a long time. “Okay,” he says. “It’s a deal. I won’t say one thing about his manners. But you’re not allowed to either. What’s good for me is good for you.”

“Shake,” says Mum. They shake hands and laugh.

I find the fifty cents and sneak out. I take a walk down the street to spend it before dinner. Dad has promised not to tell me off at dinnertime. I think about how I can make him crack. It should be easy. I will slurp my soup. He hates that.

He will tell me off. He might even yell. I just know that he can't go for the whole meal without losing it.

"This is going to be fun," I say to myself.

That night Mum sets the table with the new tablecloth. And the best knives and forks. And the plates that I am not allowed to touch. She puts the napkins in little rings. All of this means that it is an important meal. We don't usually use [cloth] napkins.

Mr. Spinks comes in his best suit. He wears gold glasses, and he frowns a lot. I can tell that he doesn't like children. You can always tell when adults don't like kids. They smile at you with their lips but not with their eyes.

Anyway, we sit down to dinner. I put my secret weapon on the floor under the table. I'm sure that I can make Dad crack without using it. But it is there if all else fails.

The first course is soup and bread rolls. I make loud slurping noises with the soup. No one says anything about it. I make the slurping noises longer and louder. They go on and on and on. It sounds like someone has pulled the plug out of the bath. Dad clears his throat but doesn't say anything.

I try something different. I dip my bread in the soup and make it soggy. Then I hold it high above my head and drop it down into my mouth. I catch it with a loud slopping noise. I try again with an even bigger bit. This time I miss my mouth, and the bit of soupy bread hits me in the eye.

Nothing is said. Dad looks at me. Mum looks at me. Mr. Spinks tries not to look at me. They are talking about how Dad might get a promotion at work. they are pretending that I am not revolting.

The next course is chicken. Dad will crack over the chicken. He'll say something. He hates me picking up the bones.

The chicken is served. “I’ve got the chicken’s bottom,” I say in a loud voice.

Dad glares at me but he doesn’t answer. I pick up the chicken and start stuffing it into my mouth with my fingers. I grab a roast potato and break it in half. I dip my fingers into the margarine and put some on the potato. It runs all over the place.

I have never seen anyone look as mad as the way Dad looks at me. He glares. He stares. He clears his throat. But he still doesn’t crack. What a man. Nothing can make him break his promise.

I snap a chicken bone in half and suck out the middle. It is hollow and I can see right through it. I suck and slurp and swallow. Dad is going red in the face. Little veins are standing out on his nose. But still he does not crack.

The last course is baked apple and custard. I will get him with that. Mr. Spinks has stopped talking about Dad’s promotion. He is discussing something about discipline. About setting limits. About insisting on standards. Something like that. I put the hollow bone into the custard and use it like a straw. I suck the custard up the hollow chicken bone.

Dad clears his throat. He is very red in the face. “Andrew,” he says.

“Yes,” I say through a mouth full of custard.

“Nothing,” he mumbles.

Dad is terrific. He is under enormous pressure but still he keeps his cool. There is only one thing left to do. I take out my secret weapon.

I place the yellow flyswatter on the table next to my knife.

Everyone looks at it lying there on the white tablecloth. They stare and stare and stare. But nothing is said.

I pick up the fly swatter and start to lick it. I lick it like an ice cream cone. A bit of chewy brown goo comes off on my tongue. I swallow it quickly. Then I crunch a bit of crispy black stuff.

Mr. Spinks rushes out to the kitchen. I can hear him being sick in the kitchen sink.

Dad stands up. It is too much for him. He cracks. “Aaaaaagh,” he screams. He charges at me with hands held out like claws.

I run for it. I run down to my room and lock the door. Dad yells and shouts. He kicks and screams. But I lie low.

Tomorrow, when he calms down, I’ll own up. I’ll tell him how I went down the street and bought a new fly swatter for fifty cents. I’ll tell him about the currants and little bits of licorice that I smeared on the fly swatter.

I mean, I wouldn’t really eat dead flies. Not unless it was for something important anyway.