

Excerpt from Teacher Man
By Frank McCourt

...(Whenever a lesson sagged, whenever their minds wandered, when too many asked for the pass, I fell back on the “dinner interrogation.” Government officials or concerned superiors might have asked, Is this a valid educational activity?

Yes, it is, ladies and gentlemen, because this is a writing class and everything is grist to our mill.

Also, the interrogation made me feel like a prosecutor playing with a witness. If the class was amused I took credit. I was at center stage: Master Teacher, Interrogator, Puppeteer, Conductor....)

James, what did you have for dinner last night?

He looks surprised. What?

Dinner, James. What did you have for dinner last night?

He seems to be searching his memory.

James, it's less than twenty-four hours ago.

Oh, yeah. Chicken.

Where did it come from?

What do you mean?

Did someone buy it, James, or did it fly in the window?

My mother.

So your mother does the shopping?

Well, yeah, except like sometimes we run out of milk or something and she sends my sister to the store. My sister always complains.

Does your mother work?

Yeah, she's a legal secretary.

How old is your sister?

Fourteen.

And you?

Sixteen.

So your mother works and does the shopping and your sister is two years younger than you and has to run to the store. You are never sent to the store?

No.

So who cooks the chicken?

My mother.

And what are you doing while your sister runs to the store and your mother is knocking herself out in the kitchen?

I'm like in my room.

Doing what?

Catching up with my homework or, you know, listening to music.

And what is your father doing while your mother cooks the chicken?

He's like in the living room watching the news on TV. He has to keep up with things because he's a broker.

Who helps your mother in the kitchen?

Sometimes my sister helps.

Not you, not your father?

We don't know how to cook.

But someone has to set the table.

My sister.

Haven't you ever set the table?

Yeah, once when my sister went to the hospital with her appendix but it was no good because I didn't know where to put things and my mom got mad and told me get out of the kitchen.

All right. Who puts the food on the table?

Mr. McCourt, I dunno why you keep asking me these questions when you know what I'm gong say. My mom puts the food on the table.

What did you have with the chicken last night?

We had, like, you know, salad.

What else?

We had baked potatoes, me and my dad. My mom and sister won't eath them because they're on a diet and the potato is a killer.

And what about the table setting? Did you have a tablecloth?

Are you kidding? We had straw place mats.

What happened during dinner?

What do you mean?

Did you talk? Was there fine music to dine by?

My dad kept listening to the TV and my mom got mad at him for not paying attention to his dinner after all the trouble she went to.

Oh, conflict at the dinner table. Didn't you all discuss the events of the day? Didn't you talk about school?

Naw. Then Mom started clearing the table because my dad went back to watch the TV. My mom got ad again because my sister said she didn't want her chicken. She said it was making her fat, the chicken. Mr. McCourt, why are we doing this? Why you asking all these questions? It's so boring.

Turn it back to the class. What do you think? This is a writing class. Did you learn anything about James and his family? Is there a story there? Jessica?

My mom would never put up with that crap. James and his dad get treated like kings. The mom and the sister do everything and they just hang out and get their dinner served up to them. I'd like to know who cleans up and washes the dishes. No, I don't have to ask: the mom, the sister.

Hands are waving, all girls. I can see they want to attack James. Wait, wait, ladies. Before you zero in on James, I'd like to know if each of you is a paragon of virtue around the house, always helpful, always thoughtful. Before we go on tell me this: how many of you, after eating last night, thanked your mother, kissed her, and complimented her on the dinner. Sheila?

That'd be phoney. The mothers know we appreciate what they do.

A dissenting voice. No, they don't. If James thanked his mother she'd faint.

I played to the crow till Daniel took the wind out of my sails.

Daniel, what did you have for dinner last night?

Veal medallions in a kind of white-wine sauce.

What did you have with the veal medallions in white wine?

Asparagus and a small tossed salad with vinaigrette.

Any appetizer?

No. Just the dinner. My mother thinks they ruin the appetite.

So , your mother cooked the veal medallions?

No, the maid.

Oh, the maid. And what was your mother doing?

She was with my father.

That's right.

And you dined alone?

Yes.

At a vast highly polished mahogany table, I suppose?

That's right.

With a crystal chandelier?

Yes.

Really?

Yes.

Did you have music in the background?

Yes.

Mozart, I suppose? To go with the table and the chandelier.

No. Telemann.

And then?

I listened to Telemann for twenty minutes. He's one of my father's favorites. When the piece ended I called my father.

And where was he, if you don't mind my asking?

He's in Sloan-Kettering Hospital with lung cancer and my mother is with him all the time because he's expected to die.

Oh, Daniel, I'm sorry. You should have told me instead of letting me put you through the dinner interrogation.

It doesn't matter. He's going to die anyway.

It was quiet in the classroom. What could I say now to Daniel? I had played my little game: clever and amusing teacher-interrogator, and Daniel had been patient. Details of his elegant solitary dinner filled the classroom. His father was here. We waited by a bed with Daniel's mother. We'd remember forever the veal medallions, the maid, the chandelier, and Daniel alone at the polished mahogany table while his father died.