



HOW I BECAME THE SULTAN OF SWAT

HOUSEFLIES ARE INHERENTLY RUDE CREATURES
AND NEED TO BE HANDLED WITH EXTREME PREJUDICE.

BY BICK TREUT

Houseflies (*Musca domestica*) are Hunterdon's great equalizer. About as ubiquitous as cell phones but lacking in class consciousness, flies are as comfortable in McMansions as they are in house trailers. If there's some food around and people to hassle, they're in.

At a semi-formal party, all efforts to maintain an aristocratic Hunterdon air implode shortly after a large *Musca domestica* buzzes the living room. The wretched thing, furry enough to comb, bounces like a basketball against our front window several times before descending dangerously close to the crab puffs.

I can't take it anymore. A guest is aghast at the sight of my trusty dollar-store fly swatter after I grab it from atop the refrigerator. "It's over there," says my wife with some controlled excitement while pointing toward the patio door. A dark object crosses my field of vision. I go in for the kill with a forehanded vengeance. A few angry swats and several gasps from the guests later and the ex-fly gets hauled off to the kitchen trash can. Small talk slowly resumes.

I learned to react to houseflies before replacing the windows and screens on our modest Bethlehem Township home. In summer months, my wife and I used to lie back on the couch and marvel at all the bugs, flies and other insects bouncing around on the ceiling. We'd watch them for hours. That's when I developed my killer instincts and technique. There wasn't any cable TV around here in those days and we barely got two channels through the big aluminum thing strapped to the chimney called an

antenna. Now we watch more TV and fewer uninvited insects, but have things really improved? When was the last time you marveled at something on cable TV?

Maybe it's because of television that we think too much these days — not so much about the housefly, but what the housefly says about us. The sight of a fly triggers complex thought processes. Self-talk, clocked at upward of 1,200 words per minute, combines with the body's fight-or-flight hormones to actuate behavior. As a result, and put plainly, some swat while others don't do squat. The inability to quickly and decisively react to a fly, known as *Musca domestica* response failure, can result from physical limitations such as near sightedness or hearing loss. But more commonly, the onslaught of fly-related self-talk overloads our brains and shuts down our responses.

The amount or volume of self-talk depends on the kinds of witnesses present and the host's relationship to them. Here's an example: A woman sees a fly in her Hunterdon home while company is over. She's new in the neighborhood and harbors some status-seeking vulnerabilities. Her self-talk probably sounds like this (read fast): "Oh my god, what's that doing here? Do they (guests) see it? What will they think? That fly shouldn't be here. It's ugly. What will the guests think of me? Maybe they didn't see it. Maybe they did! They're going to think that I'm not worthy of this large center hall Colonial home. Maybe they're right!" Emotional elements or schema are triggered — for example, shame, anger or disgust. The stress hormone cortisol is released. Now she is frozen, dumbfounded, and appears glazed-over. This is

called dissociation.

Guests can also become dissociated. In a well-appointed Franklin Township home, a small group of high-income earners wearing polo shirts is talking about local school board politics. A particularly noisy fly circles the room several times before putting down on the bouffant of a smartly dressed woman. No one says a word while the fly does the Macarena or, more accurately, preens itself by cleaning its eyes and dusting off its legs by rubbing them together. A moment or two after the fly departs, the conversation resumes as the dissociation from *Musca domestica* response failure wears off.

At a Clinton Township dinner party, a sleek-looking fly surprises guests by landing on the drumstick of a freshly prepared oven stuffer roast. "White meat or dark?" the thunderstruck host inquires. "Oh, ah, white meat today, please," I reply.

Where hosts are a little too serious, it's good to have an old timer around, who'll break the spell with a knee-slapper like: "How do you keep flies out of the dining room? Put a pile of (expletive) in the kitchen." While the joker might not be invited back, it's best to be forthright about flies. Without a predator with a fly swatter, a housefly will take full advantage of its freedom and wreak havoc on hosts and guests alike.

So it isn't the fly that's problematic. It's how we respond. To cut down on flies, many Hunterdonians crank up their central air conditioning systems and keep their windows shut from May right on through September.

But I say, don't let the flies chase you inside. Just be ready with a well-practiced forehand smash. Tennis lessons might help. ■