The Bill from my Father

By Bernard Cooper

When I was 28 years old, my father sent me a bill for his paternal services. Typed on his law firm's onion-skin stationery, the bill itemized the money he'd spent on me over my lifetime. Since he hadn't kept tabs on the exact amounts he'd doled out over the years, expenditures were rounded off to the nearest dollar and labeled "Food," "Clothing," "Tuition," and "Incidentals." Beneath the tally, in the firm but detached language common to his profession, he demanded that I pay him back.

The total was somewhere in the neighborhood of $2 million, an especially hefty sum in 1978. I remember being impressed by the amount. What an expensive life I'd lived. I was shocked and insulted too, of course, not only because my father had made such a calculation but because my life could be added up or reduced to a single figure. To see your existence in the form of a bill gives all your loves and fears and struggles, the cumulative tumult of being human, about as much poignancy as a check for a cup of coffee.

It read, "Your obligations to your father, the party of the first part, are considerable. And the only way to impress upon you, the party of the second part, the necessity of compensating him for the fiscal burdens he bore in your behalf is to make his sacrifices evident in the form of the following, recorded herein as a legal and binding document. Should you fail to make payment in full, this matter will result in actions for which I advise you to hire counsel." I double-checked his signature. It was his, all right. The letters rich with loops and convolutions.

Go ahead, I thought. Let him dun me. See if I pay. No parent in his right mind asks his child to reimburse him for that child's life. I didn't ask to be born, I thought

melodramatically. Besides, had I known I'd be charged for my boyhood, I might have eaten fewer snacks, been easier on my shoes, more frugal with my allowance.

I couldn't help but dream up a doozy of a counterclaim, its itemizations even more preposterous than my father's. Chronic insecurity-- $90,000. Narcissistic wound-- $75,000. Oedipal complex-- $7,000.

Since, of course, these damages were psychological in nature, it was both difficult and whimsical to assign them a monetary value. But the punitive spirit of this counterclaim was gratifying, for awhile at least. Then the whole petty endeavor depressed me, and I thought, is this what we are to each other? A flurry of demands that can't be met? Hurts for which there's no restitution?

During the restless days and nights that followed, I couldn't settle on a convincing or comprehensible reason to explain why my father had sent me the bill, though I suspected the catalyst might have had something to do with his offer, a few months earlier, to buy me a new car. He'd made the offer on a day I'd come to visit him at his Spanish house in Hollywood, the house in which I'd grown up. As I pulled into the driveway, he was busy watering birds of paradise in his front yard, sturdy orange flowers that he'd cultivated, to his constant astonishment, from a bed of drab gravel.

Back then, I drove a Fiat whose paint had oxidized to the overall color and texture of rust. The car sputtered as I shifted into park and the sagging tailpipe, which I'd had to bind to the cars undercarriage with electrical tape, coughed a cloud of noxious exhaust. Just a year I'd purchased the car with money from a small inheritance left me by my mother, it fell apart with an almost vengeful rapidity. The vinyl upholstery of the bucket seats began to rub off on passengers' hands and thighs in sticky black patches. Soon the seats were nothing but lumps of raw foam, and even those were crumbling like sponge cake. One of

the rear windows no longer rolled up, the pane trapped within the door. On cold nights, a stray dog made the back seat its home, leaving behind a legion of fleas to feast on my ankles as I drove around town.

It was humiliating to be seen inside the car, especially in Los Angeles. When idling at a stop light beside a purring sports car with rear stabilizers, anodized hubcaps, and a leather interior, I had to force myself to remember that an automobile does not a man make, and that I was a writer who placed a higher value on words than on material possessions, which is to say that I cultivated a hollow sense of superiority around new cars.

My father sauntered toward the Fiat as I got out, peeking through the perpetually open window despite my attempt to block his view. Stocky and balding, in a state of continual agitation, my father was also capable of a tenderness that seem to light him from within and that stirred me like daybreak stirs a bird.

"Hey," he said. "Look like you could use a new set of wheels."

"I can't afford a new car," I told him. I distinctly recall facing my father, his gardening clothes stained with grass and darkened by perspiration, and shaping my tone so that I sounded neither pitiful-- "I'm too poor"-- or petulant-- "I'll never be able to buy a new car."

Before I knew it, my father and I were ensconced in his white El Dorado, gliding with the frictionless speed of a dream toward a Toyota dealership in West Covina, whose ads he'd seen on TV. He pointed a stubby finger at his chest. "Let me handle this," he said. "I've bought plenty of cars in my life and I know how to deal with these bastards. You watch. I'll beat them at their own game. They won't know what hit them."

On one hand, Dad's braggadocio made me feel invincible, as though I were in the company of a seasoned pro. On the other hand, it relegated me to the role of admiring onlooker, and suggested that I was too incompetent and naive to buy my own car, which was entirely true. I floundered when it came to the treacherous etiquette of negotiating a major sale, a feat which required-- it seemed to me-- a keen mistrust of one's fellow men, coupled with a barely sublimated bloodlust. As far as I was concerned, getting gypped out of a few bucks was simply a built-in fee for avoiding confrontations with strangers.

I'd watched my father often enough to know that such transactions excited him into what can only be described as a rapture of antagonism. He didn't mind yelling threats and pounding desks and generally hurling himself bodily into the arena of commerce. Still, if a new car required me to be embarrassed by his aggression, bring on the blushing. And so I let myself relax into the plush bucket seat, cradled and safe as the Caddy whizzed past slower traffic, huge and unassailable, as regal as a motorized mansion.

As we walked across the asphalt lot of the Toyota dealership, triangular plastic pendants rippled and snapped in the breeze. I thanked Dad in advance and told him that I didn't need whitewalls, an air conditioner, or a radio. Basic transportation would be just fine. He nodded and forged ahead, his stride martial, his shoulders squared. Secretly, I hoped my modest expectations might endear me to him even more. Maybe he'd close the deal that very day before his mood changed, before I said something that would inadvertently set him off. Before he said "crap" or "bastard" to the dealer.

My excitement was indistinguishable from panic. I wanted a beautiful new Toyota more desperately with every step. I wanted an end to the self-consciousness I felt on the road, an end to the shameful sense that the thunderous rumbling and rank exhaust were coming from my person rather than my car.

The showroom felt bracingly cool after the heat of West Covina. Highlights glittered in the flawless paint jobs of the display models. In the center of the room, a sleek new convertible turned around and around on an enormous platform, as if swooning to the muzak. The second we entered, salespeople sensing prey rose from their desks and converged. It occurred to me that we would be the prize for the fastest walker, the one whose handshake or hail greeting reached us first. The victory was a skinny man whose snug black suit lent him an eel-like iridescence. Or perhaps I was just seeing him as my father might-- slippery, unctuous, not to be trusted.

Dad shifted his weight to meet the man's gaze, his posture erect. He kicked a tire as if to gauge, through his knowing toes, the vehicle's overall quality. He squinted at the sticker price. "John," said my father, reading the salesman's name tag. "Firstly, I'm an attorney. Secondly, when it comes to cars, I'm not some idiot off the street. A cousin of mine is fleet manager of a Cadillac dealership in San Bernardino." A complete fabrication, as far as I knew. "If we cut through the crap, you just might make yourself a sale. My son here-- I'm buying the boy a car-- doesn't need any bells or whistles."

"I'm Bernard," I said to the salesman.

He shook my hand without taking his eyes off my father. "Well, Mr--?"

"Cooper. Edward. Attorney at law."

"I've got to hand it to you, Mr. Cooper. It's nice to meet a customer who knows what he wants and comes prepared to do business. Makes my job a whole lot easier."

My father shot me a sidelong glance, as if to say, watch and learn.

"I'm going to make this painless," said the salesman. He spun on his heel and walked toward the glass door that led to the lot. We followed him outside to a veritable poppy fields of new Corollas, till we reached a red two-door that John claimed was the least expensive automobile on the lot.

"This is the cheapest?" asked my father. Though it pains me to do so, I must add that my father's gold Star of David had loosed itself from the mid-interior of his shirt to glint conspicuously in the afternoon light, the sight of which, given my father's unabashed haggling, caused a chord of shame to vibrate inside me. I felt compelled to explain to the salesman how my father had worked hard for everything he owned. He was a hoarder, a scrimper, a seeker of bargains who could never take his solvency for granted. And in this respect he was like thousands of people who'd grown up poor and endured the Depression, Jewish or not.

But that was a lot to explain to a salesman, especially on the cusp of a deal that would change my life. And to put it bluntly, if my father was conforming to the cliche of the cheap Jew, I was that cliche's beneficiary. I peered at the car, feigning disinterest, quite a performance considering how I coveted that little red Corolla.

"Mr. Cooper," said the salesman. "I know a shrewd man when I see one. And I'm going to do something that could put my job on the line. But before I tell you what it is, Mr. Cooper, I want you to promise that you won't say a word to my boss."

I'd once heard that repeating a person's name was a way to make them feel important, to win them over, and John it seemed had heard the same. "Mr. Cooper, I'm going to let you drive out of here for a mere $200 over the factory price. I'm going to scratch my commission on this. Frankly, I need the sales points more than I need the money, and if we can lock up this deal pronto, it'll be worth my while, and of course worth yours."

Here, metabolism obscures memory. My heart was running on all cylinders. My mouth went dry.

"You've got to be [BEEP] me, John," said my father. "I know you can give it to me under factory. I'm not paying a penny more than factory. Period."

"As I said, Mr. Cooper, I don't mind giving up my commission, but I can't lose money on the deal. I'm giving you the best price you're going to find in LA county, in the state of California."

Other customers were milling uncomfortably close to my Corolla, trying out driver's seats, adjusting rearview mirrors. I wanted to turn to my father and blurt, "Why would he lie?"

"I'm not buying it," my father said sternly. It took me a second to realize he met the dealer's story, not the car itself. "I know how this game is played, and I'll play along up to a point, but we've reached that point. So let's see what kind of deal you can give me."

"Shop around if you don't believe me, Mr. Cooper. Then come on back. The offer still stands. Better act quickly, though, because this baby isn't going to stay on the lot much longer."

"I guess you didn't hear me," said my father.

"Look at me, Mr. Cooper. I have no reason to lead you on."

My father gave John the once-over, then turned to me. "Let's go," he said. "We're taking our business elsewhere." Before we took a step, the salesman curtly thanked my father and walked away. The two of us waited a moment with the tacit understanding that his retreat might have been a strategy to provoke my father into giving chase. The sun beat down from a cloudless sky, asphalt softening beneath our feet.

"I think he's basically an honest man," I mumbled.

"Honest my ass." My father looked at me with something like pity. I'd never catch on. I would forever remain a sucker, a rube. Muzak faintly wafted from the showroom as the salesman swung the door open and walked inside. "Well," Dad announced. "Show's over." And we trudged across the lot toward his Caddy.

The drive back to Los Angeles took a good 40 minutes. My father still fumed from the encounter with the salesman, his ears and neck flushed with blood. Dad insisted that the deal was far from over. "The guy's playing hardball, but you watch. The phone will be ringing when we get back to the house. It'll be him, and he'll say--" My father launched into an imitation of John cooing, "Mr. Cooper this and Mr. Cooper that." My father promised that when the call finally came, John would apologize for being too hasty and lower the price. I'd have my car before I knew it.

One day passed. Two. Three. Each day, I called my father on various transparent pretexts and attempted to find out whether he'd heard anything from the salesman. On the fourth day, I steeled myself and asked him outright.

"Keep your pants on," grumbled my father. "I said he'd call, didn't I?"

By the end of the week, however, my pants were sagging. The car had probably been sold. In the meantime, I'd researched the prices at other Toyota dealerships around town and discovered that John's offer was the best of the bunch. And so I called my father in a last-ditch effort to own the car.

"Dad," I said. "I've done some comparative pricing."

"So?"

"I think we should go for the Corolla before it's sold. And if it's a matter of not wanting to pay more than the factory price-- and who can blame you?-- I'd be happy to contribute the extra $200 myself." The proposal had about it the pleasing hue of teamwork, and I wished I'd thought of it days ago.

"It's not about the $200," shouted my father. "It's a waiting game. He's holding out so I'll come running back and throw my money at him. If you can't sit tight for a while, if you have to have everything you want right when you want it, you might as well forget the whole damn thing." Before he hung up, he said, "And don't pester me anymore. I'll call you when the car is ready."

The bill arrived after a month of silence. By then I had given up on the car, resigned to drive the Fiat until it broke down completely, or until I could afford to make payments on a new car, whichever came first. I suspected my father might brood about our day at the dealership, but I wasn't prepared for the extremity of his reaction, if in fact the bill was a reaction. Whenever I tried to make a connection, the machinery of cause and effect began to break down. Perhaps in the intervening month, my father had become more offended by my offer to supplement the cost of the car, thinking I'd implied he couldn't afford it,

couldn't pull off the deal on his own. Who was I, he must have wondered, to have offered him money?

And yet, even taking into account the full force of my father's volatility, it seemed unlikely that my offer of $200 would result in him suing me for $2 million.

As the days wore on, my longing for the car grew dimmer, while my father's, no doubt, deepened-- my plan should have worked, that car should be ours-- thrusting him back to the deprivation he knew as a boy. The salesman's refusal to call must have undermined his notion of how the world worked, how bargains were struck by men like himself, men possessed of wile and nerve.

What had happened, or failed to happen, defined his every paternal assurance, his promise that the phone would ring, the salesman buckle, the car become mine. How humiliated he must've been to know that I awaited his call. That he'd asked me to wait must have made it worse. My father's refusal to be in the wrong meant that I'd have to wait forever.

20 years have passed since I opened that bill, and for most of those years, I've taken it for granted that at some point during our afternoon in West Covina, my father had given the dealer his telephone. But I've sifted through that trip a dozen times, squinting against the glare of new cars, breathing the icy air of the showroom, and I can't recall my father handing over one of his business cards or filling out a form of any sort. Even if my father had been right after all, the salesman wouldn't have known where to reach him, what number to call.