

EDWARD HARDY

MR. DUN

SOME PEOPLE GO THROUGH LIFE more likely than others to suffer from leg cramps, or insomnia, or oily hair, but Mr. Dun tended to go out on a rant. Things would build up. His psychic horizon would narrow and, poof, he'd be off, never recognizing where the rail of words had finally driven him until well after the fact. But at least he came by it honestly, as Mr. Dun had descended from a long line of ranters. An uncle of Mr. Dun's once went off on a bluster and ended up owning a restaurant, but that's another story. This one begins with Mr. Dun in line at the post office.

There he stood, rocking, from his left foot to his right in the unusually immobile line as the outside door opened, yet again. A new gust of frigid air crowded in while a direct-looking woman with long dark hair and a glistening leather coat propped the door open with her shoulder, allowing her male companion to step outside first. Mr. Dun, already worn down by a difficult day at work, was all set to shout, "Close the damn door," only the woman had an oddly familiar smile, quick and sharp, like the look of someone who, until quite recently, Mr. Dun had loved. The woman said: "Emotionally, it wasn't worth it," and turned her back to the line.

These tiny leftover snippets of conversation always found Mr. Dun. They fluttered up as people passed on the street, floating in mid-air like so much verbal exhaust before wrapping around Mr. Dun's shoulders. "It really ticked me off," and "I was made for this," were

two that Mr. Dun ran into a lot. Each time he overheard one of these oh-so-familiar lines Mr. Dun would shake his head. Can everyone on the planet really be having the exact same set of conversations? It really did tick him off.

"Emotionally it wasn't worth it." Mr. Dun watched the breath of these words as they blew back past the Most Wanted on the wall, across the counters with the thick zip code books on chains, and settled, breaking into syllables atop the hats and shoulders of the long immobile line.

Unfortunately, this happened to be the exact phrase that Margaret—the woman who until last week Mr. Dun had been planning to spend many long years with—had used to end their thirty-nine month romantic involvement. "Emotionally, it wasn't worth it," Margaret said over a steaming plate of lasagna with artichokes. It hurt to think about. Still. What did it matter that Mr. Dun had already invested more than three years in the relationship? What did it matter that Mr. Dun been left to recoup once more, at his age? What did it matter that, from Mr. Dun's perspective, emotionally it was worthwhile?

A pair of businesswomen wearing bright wool coats strolled past. In their wake the phrase, "How about net worth?" tumbled over Mr. Dun's left shoulder. It spun twice before landing across Mr. Dun's left arm like a cloth.

Worth. The coincidence astounded Mr. Dun. How could you be thinking of a word and then hear it aloud at the exact same instant? It would be like reading "artichoke" in a restaurant review at the very moment you heard that word on television. What were the chances?

Worth. It wasn't worth it. But no action is ever free. Time exists, Mr. Dun reasoned. We pay for our lives with our lives. Time is money. Time is definitely money.

"My time is damn valuable," Mr. Dun heard himself say. The very large man ahead of him turned to nod.

Mr. Dun glanced at the twenty-two unstamped bills in his right hand. His vision began to feel pinched. This was not unlike the sensation that often signaled the onset of another migraine, so Mr. Dun took a deep breath. He had suffered from migraines for years. Sometimes they could last for days.

Yet this was different, a slightly porous yet all-encompassing sensation, like a warm wash cloth pressing in during the first stages of a fever.

Then again, Mr. Dun had always been able to spot the waddle of a genuine idea when it wandered by. Besides, who knew where your ideas really came from anyway?

With a shiver, Mr. Dun recognized that it would only take a slight adjustment. He stood beside the zip code books and thought: Mark this spot, because there and then, with a heavy batch of bills still in hand, Mr. Dun decided to simply go ahead and bill everyone.

At the window, he bought extra stamps.

MR. DUN FAIRLY EXPLODED into the cold wind of the street. This would not be a short burst of a rant, he could feel that. Instead it had the clattering, gathering, obliterating momentum of a far longer one, the kind that could not be easily recalled. But Mr. Dun recognized this only distantly, the way you might notice a faint hum in the back of a movie theater.

From the sidewalk Mr. Dun gazed up at the golden, still-lit office windows, at the wires and satellite dishes, the distant cell phone towers, all carrying billable transactions, on and on throughout the universe. Of course, this was the way of the world.

Mr. Dun checked his watch. He calculated that his entire time spent in line at the post office came to twenty-one minutes. He would have to work out an hourly rate. And shouldn't that be on a sliding scale? Something that might be adjusted up several fat percentage points to cover annoyance?

At the end of the block, Mr. Dun paused to tabulate the seconds he spent waiting for the traffic light when there was no traffic. Thirty-two. A quick bill to the city would cover that.

A heating oil truck splashed through a puddle of slush, drenching Mr. Dun's right leg. Mr. Dun took out his pad and copied the toll free How's-My-Driving? number from the bumper. They'd have an address. There'd be annoyance, lost time and cleaning to cover in that invoice.

When Mr. Dun finally did step off the curb, someone in a big black car honked for no reason at all. Mr. Dun took down the license plate. Aural intrusion.

All bills all the time. He smiled. Then as Mr. Dun closed in on his house, he realized that creating the necessary lists would be the most difficult aspect of this entire procedure. The who and how much of it. The

hunting down of addresses. Calculating interest, too. That might take time, but the software could always be commissioned.

Inside, Mr. Dun went straight to the computer. First, he billed all the home shopping channels for the accumulated seconds he had spent skimming past with the remote. Click. Pause. Decision. Click. Pause. Decision. No entertainment there what-so-ever. How many valuable hours in the last year had that consumed? Late payment would most certainly result in fines.

Then while wrestling with the entire question of how best to bill for spent mental energy, Mr. Dun decided to invoice his office for the hours they forced him to think about work while he was not "on site." Why are they in my dreams, Mr. Dun wondered. He began to move around the house.

Pacing through the cellar, after securing the furnace manufacturer's address (he planned to invoice for the mental stress of thinking about that annoying click-on-click-off noise), Mr. Dun stepped on an empty plastic tennis ball canister. The top blew off with a boom. It startled him, but Mr. Dun composed himself, picked up the container and found the company's 1-800 number. To be billed for fright, he wrote.

When the phone rang upstairs, the telemarketer asked if Mr. Dun was the "household decision-maker in terms of frozen food purchases." Mr. Dun lied and said that he was not, but before hanging up he made sure to collect the proper invoice information. Unwanted aural intrusions henceforth to be billed at time-and-a-half.

Mr. Dun then went on to invoice everyone who in the last seventy-two hours had made him wait. The boiler guy. The cable repair people. The car dealership, and for routine service no less. He billed the city for the recycling trucks that roamed his neighborhood, leaving the sound of breaking glass hanging in the air at four a.m. Which brought up the question of a proper rate for sleep. Is all sleep of equal value? Could some sleep command a premium? Mr. Dun billed the senders of junk mail for the kilocalories required to lift, sort, discard and recycle. He billed the television networks, and even individual production companies for his violent dreams. He billed the lottery commission for hopeless fantasies and bad luck. He billed the sad pony ride at the mall for, well, being sad.

The sky had darkened considerably by the time Mr. Dun sat down to go through his old appointment book. In one burst he invoiced out seventeen separate bills to Margaret. Some were for past dinners and

social events that had not been of Mr. Dun's choosing. Some were simply for making Mr. Dun think about her again and again and again, when there was no future left to contemplate. Wasn't that emotional distress? Wasn't his time there worth a little something?

Why, Mr. Dun wondered, plucking the warm invoices from his printer, has no one ever thought of this? He slipped the bills into their envelopes, sorted the piles by zip code, applied postage, snapped rubber bands around the stacks and clucked his tongue. After a short walk to the mailbox Mr. Dun returned and lapsed into a deep sleep.

IT WAS THE MIDDLE OF THE MORNING when Mr. Dun woke up. He was late for work and would, of course, call in to see if anything pressing had happened in his absence. But as Mr. Dun stood in the kitchen holding the receiver, he noticed that his dreams from last night, and even the fragmented memories of the previous day, all had a tacky quality to them. There was something spongy around the edges that wouldn't let Mr. Dun through to recall what had actually happened. But he could recall the satisfying feel of applying a self-adhesive stamp.

The following Saturday, after Mr. Dun heard the metallic flap of the mail slot and collected the day's take from the patch of sun on the hall floor, he sifted through the catalogs until he discovered a small green envelope. Margaret's familiar return address sat in the upper left corner. Mr. Dun let the catalogs fall. He turned the envelope over twice before opening it. Margaret, he found, had chosen what seemed to be an unreasonably high hourly rate to bill him for mental cruelty. Then, the not-so-veiled collection agency threat. In the next days there were others, hundreds, from all over. And as the events immediately following Mr. Dun's post office visit slowly resolved into a sort of focus, Mr. Dun realized that none of his respondents had bothered to enclose a check. More than one had used the words: "Full Amount Due Upon Receipt." It had, he realized, spread like a virus.