



Manhattan

Mommie Dearest

Once mortified by her mother's haggling, Shoba Narayan finds that driving a hard bargain is as de rigueur in New York as in New Delhi

Illustration by Miguel Gallardo

THE THOUGHT OCCURRED AS I EYED A STUNNING PERSIAN CARPET in a downtown Manhattan shop. The Mogul-inspired piece looked terrific but cost thousands more than I was prepared to pay. The slight smile on the manager's mustachioed face suggested that he was willing to bargain. But where and how to begin?

Middle age brings with it many challenges: a home, the pleasure and pain of furnishing one, and the sobering realization that you can actually learn something from your mother. For me, middle age was mostly about sticker shock—at the cost of the curtains, sofas, fabrics, and bric-a-brac that it takes to convert a classic six into a cozy home. When a year passed without my buying a single item of furniture,

I called my mother in desperation.

“Mom,” I said. “Teach me how to bargain.”

“My baby,” she cooed. “Welcome to the fold.”

I HAVE ALWAYS BEEN AN AWKWARD negotiator, even though I grew up in India among women who viewed the phrase *fixed price* with a flexibility that drove shopkeepers to tears. In spite of, or perhaps because of, watching them haggle down the price of everything from a Russian samovar to a Japanese teapot, I have been hard-pressed and altogether too proud (according to my mother) to do it myself.

Now, of course, there is little shame attached to bargaining. EBay and its innumerable sister sites have turned the Internet into a giant souk where gold Krugerrands, Iraqi banknotes with Saddam Hussein’s likeness, split-level homes, secondhand clothes, frequent-flier miles, beta-blockers, diet pills, used furniture, and useless collectibles are bartered, traded, and auctioned to the highest—or lowest—bidder. The so-called borderless economy in which a Danish collector can name his price for a dirndl skirt sold by a Tasmanian farmer has allowed Eastern practices such as haggling to seep into the Western psyche—so much so that the American Management Association now offers a seminar for purchasing managers on “bargaining tactics.” It is only one short step to the day when Fortune 500 companies send their buyers to Egyptian bazaars to master the appropriate stance and body language.

Bargaining isn’t hard to learn but comes easier to some than to others. Like flirtation, it is more attitude than technique, more style than skill. It requires aplomb, a certain *je ne sais quoi* that conceals how desperately you covet an object. Unlike negotiation, which is straightforward, dickering is roundabout, full of dips and detours—like calligraphy is to writing. You have to flatter and charm, tease and cajole. You have to talk in circles, skirt the issue of price, and not take yourself so seriously—all the qualities that had been drummed out of me by two decades of price-abiding life in the United States.

Americans are famously bad bargainers

compared with, say, southern Europeans or Asians. They don’t have the sense of entitlement of an Italian or the swagger of a Spaniard, both of whom can—without wincing—ask for something at a price that will put the merchant out of business. The Italians call bargaining *mercanteggiare*, which to me sounds like “egging the merchant to old age.”

The French are no laggards either. As my Provençal friend says with perverse but compelling logic, just because a shopkeeper thinks a Tiffany lamp is worth \$1,000 doesn’t make it so. “To you, ze lamp may be worth ten dollars. To you, a buttered croissant may be worth more than his lamp.” In other words, it is all a question of perceived value.

Bargaining comes naturally to the Portuguese, the Israelis, the Moroccans, the Turks, and other Mediterranean peoples.

They have a flair for insults and can fake ferocity as needed. Asians flatter the salesman into lowering his price, while Latinos flirt their way to a good deal. We Americans, on the other hand, gloat when we get a car salesman to knock \$100 off the \$34,999 sticker price—instead of offering \$100 for the car, as any self-respecting Greek would.

Not that Americans are entirely without bargaining skills. Real estate transactions usually in-

volve some back-and-forth, as do estimates for construction jobs. But for the majority of Americans, buying and selling occurs minus haggling. You go to the grocery store, the clerk rings it up, and you pay. You go to the mall, zip through several stores, and pay what they ask. It’s fast, it’s efficient, and it works. So why waste time negotiating?

This particular argument holds no merit for compulsive bargainers like my mother. To my mother, it is not the means to an end, the route to a good buy. It is a way of life, a means of adding spice and fun to what is essentially a chore. The actual money involved is almost beside the point. Mom will bargain with equal passion over a \$5 cab fare and a \$15,000 antique.

As a child, I found accompanying my mother to the local bazaar to be an excruciating experience. Mom would spend hours haggling pennies off the price of potatoes and carrots, until it got dark and we were forced to take a taxi or an auto-

There is little shame attached to bargaining. EBay and its innumerable sister sites have turned the Internet into a giant souk

rickshaw home. It was no use pointing out to her that we were spending three times as much on cab fare as we were saving on vegetables. For Mom, it was the principle of the thing.

MY MOTHER ASSUMES THAT salespeople, regardless of whether they are in the Ukraine or in Utah, exist for one reason: to rip her off. And she tries her best to return the favor. In many cases, she doesn't speak the language or understand costs and craftsmanship. Still, she has no problem offering a sum so far beneath the asking price that most vendors only shake their heads and laugh. Once she has entertained them, she gets them to entertain her offer.

There was the time in Jakarta when she and a furniture maker engaged in an eye-lock. She couldn't speak the Indonesian language, and he couldn't speak Tamil or English, the only two languages my mother knows. So she tried to outstare him into a lower price. He wouldn't budge. There they stood for what seemed like hours, gesticulating fiercely over a hand-carved rosewood chair. My mother got the chair in the end. She always does. The Indonesian merchant's wife went into labor in the middle of the transaction, and Mom conned the man into thinking that she had brought him good luck. She put her arms together in the universal baby-rocking gesture and said, "You will have a bonny baby boy." She gave him a thumbs-up. The merchant was all smiles. Not only did the man give her the chair for a song, he threw in a matching ottoman for free.

In the gold souks of Beirut, Mom was alternately querulous and cajoling as she shopped for a gem-studded dagger. Bargaining with an Arab is harder than pushing your event with a New York City editor. Arab jewelers are so world-weary, so oversubscribed, and so filthy rich that they routinely and brusquely brush off customers. They've seen it all, heard it all. Hell, they invented bargaining—or so they think. For once, Mom couldn't indulge in her favorite tactic of threatening to walk out unless they lowered the price. The bearded sheiks would not just have held open the door, they would have booted her out. That's the

thing with bargaining. Besides knowing when to call somebody's bluff, you have to remember that he or she can call yours at any time. Just like in poker.

With Asians, Mom flatters. She banter with the shopkeeper, compliments his shop, his artistic eye, his taste, even his mother. "Your mother must have washed her womb with antiseptic to give birth to an honest, upright boy like you," she will say. Asian men (and Russian men, too, for that matter) are suckers for compliments about their mothers. They venerate elders, a fact that Mom shamelessly capitalizes on.

Before she goes shopping in Shanghai or Hong Kong, her beauty routine includes dyeing her hair—gray, not black. "The more white hairs I have, the more money I will save," she says. At the bazaar, she moans and groans, feigns arthritis, and blinks myopically. "Come now, you aren't going to begrudge an old grandmother like

Arab jewelers are so world-weary, so oversubscribed, and so filthy rich that they routinely and brusquely brush off customers. They've seen it all, heard it all

me a few pennies, are you?" she chides. If all else fails, Mom plays her trump card—she invokes ancestors. "My grandfather will turn in his grave if I pay that much, and yours will curse you for cheating an old woman," she will say. Ancestral curses are serious business in the Far East. Naturally, my mother gets the object of her desire.

INDIA IS A CHALLENGE FOR Mom mostly because of the competition. There are thousands of hard-nosed negotiators just like her—some of them even better. In India, she uses many of the techniques that have been written about ad nauseam in guidebooks: "Aim to pay about half what the shopkeeper is asking. Always ask for extras—free packing and shipping, or a free gift thrown in with your purchase." If all else fails, she flirts with the poor sap until he is hypnotized like a snake under a spell.

As for me, I seem to have shed my skin. Although I look Indian and am from India, I find myself instantly pegged as a *firangi*, a foreigner. My stance is defensive. I protect my space, rather than aggressively hogging it like my compatriots. My tone is polite and matter-of-fact rather than outraged. My attitude indicates my willingness to compro-

mise. In other words, I am reasonable.

Reason has no place in Indian bazaars. People don't say what they mean, and nothing is what it seems. The gem-studded necklace displayed in the air-conditioned jewelry shop in Jaipur may be an inferior rough-hewn sample. The real stuff is in the back or upstairs and will only be brought out after a couple of rounds of soda, when the jeweler has decided that you are a bona fide customer worth his while. Or you can skip the pleasantries and do what my mother does—run an eye over the sparkling offerings behind the glass counter, pronounce them to be “rubbish,” and demand to be taken upstairs.

In the end, it is not any one thing that she does. It is who she is. When my mother enters a shop, her goal isn't to walk out with something; rather, it is to spend a pleasant hour taking stock, talking shop, “gup-shopping,” as she calls it. If she walks out with a purchase, it is merely a fringe benefit of what was essentially a good time. The reason she is so good at bargaining, I realized, is because she has so much fun doing it.

So I ate crow. I told my mother that after years of scornfully dismissing her tactics as a mere waste of time, I needed her help with furnishing my apartment. I wanted her to fly to New York and suss out some deals. To my alarm, she readily accepted.

We all say and do things that we later—or in my case, instantly—regret. For me, shopping with my mother fell in that category. I had done it hundreds of times all over the globe and hated it each time. It typically takes about four hours longer than I anticipated and usually ends with our being unceremoniously evicted from the premises and told never to return. Besides, New York was virgin territory for Mom but is my adopted hometown. I didn't want her to embarrass me or, worse, get me blacklisted at all the high-end boutiques I admire.

So I imposed a set of rules. Mom couldn't claim to be related to the mayor or Michael Jackson, as she frequently and indiscriminately does. This is America, not Japan, I told her: Being related to Michael Jackson could land her in jail. Second, she

had to open negotiations at 50 percent of the asking price, not 5 percent, as is her wont. Third, she had to stop cursing in Tamil. Offended shopkeepers would not curse her back, as she was used to; they would sue her for slander. After all, I said again, this is America.

Our first stop was a carpet shop on Park Avenue South. As soon as Mom saw the shopkeeper, she concluded that he was a

Pakistani from Peshawar and that I could and should bargain.

Egged on by Mom, I took a deep breath and simulated the light-headed feeling that steals over me after a couple of vodka martinis.

“So,” I drawled, flicking a dismissive finger at the carpet I coveted. “How much is this thing worth?”

“Ten thousand dollars,” he said without blinking.

I laughed derisively. It was forced and came out more like a cough, but at least I tried.

“You are joking with me, my friend,” I said, assuming a familiarity where none existed.

“Would I lie to you, sister?” The man took it a step farther. “This is a family heirloom. I would happily give it to you for free, but my mother will kill me if I part with it for anything less than ninety-five hundred dollars.”

The dance had begun. He had lowered the price. But he had also brought in his mother. I had no choice but to bring in mine. Next stop—ancestors.

“And my mother will kill me if I buy it for anything more than forty-five hundred dollars,” I said.

I ended up paying \$7,000 for the room-sized carpet. Mom insisted that I had overpaid by about \$5,000, but I was jubilant. In my mind, I had found a bargain.

To celebrate, Mom and I went to the 26th Street flea market. We quoted Pushkin and bought a small walnut side table from a soulful Russian for \$40—a quarter of his asking price. Mom amused a Dominican vendor with her outrageous renditions of Spanish love songs; he sold us a pair of mahogany nightstands for a mere \$200. Following her cue, I effusively complimented some Senegalese drummers and picked up a number of African masks for next to nothing. We claimed kinship with

the Tibetans (“You hate the Chinese. We hate them too”) and bought a red Tibetan chest for \$400. At the St. George's furniture thrift shop, near Gramercy Park, I haggled half-heartedly with the shopkeeper before buying a large china cabinet—at the asking price, but with free delivery thrown in. Uptown, at the Spence-Chapin thrift shop, Mom harassed the coiffed woman behind the counter to the point where she thrust a brand-new bookcase at us for \$20, provided we would “just leave.”

My apartment was beginning to fill up. New York, it seemed, had more bargains than I'd thought. But the true test of Mom's *métier* had to be my favorite SoHo boutique—let's call it Foss. Nobody haggled at Foss; they whisper.

Statuesque salespeople in black Armani-esque clothes raised their eyebrows as my sari-clad mother and I walked through the sprawling minimalist space. I wanted everything—black bowls, clever china, silver and pewter accessories, purple suede sofas, chairs shaped like letters of the alphabet, and sumptuous throws. I wanted to move in.

“May I help you?” asked the slim, blond, disapproving saleswoman.

Where I saw sarcasm, Mom saw solicitousness. She sailed in, took the saleswoman's arm, and asked for advice on sofas. She listened carefully, nodded and smiled, and tested various models by sitting down and bouncing. She confided her fears. “My daughter, poor thing, is trying to get pregnant. So we need a sofa that is baby-proof, you see, just in case the stork delivers something next month.”

Mom giggled; the saleswoman giggled. I hung back, feeling awkward as always.

That's the thing with bargaining. It is ultimately a people sport. Personable individuals such as my mother have a better shot at it. Even in places like Foss.

Mom picked out a sturdy purple sofa, which they both decided would hide spit-up stains and baby poo. The saleswoman gave her a 20 percent discount without our even having to ask. Seeing my mother's crestfallen face, she immediately raised it to 30. “I can only give you thirty percent,” she said. “Even we employees are only allowed forty percent.”

She shouldn't have said that. Mom pounced on it. Pretty soon, the saleswoman was calling her boss to ask if she could buy a sofa on behalf of “a lovely old lady from India” so that they could offer her 40 percent off. Mom spoke with the boss on the phone. She got 40 percent off—with Scotchgard, delivery, and an extra year's guarantee thrown in for free. □

If Mom walks out with a purchase, it is merely a fringe benefit of what was essentially a good time. The reason she is so good at bargaining is because she has so much fun doing it