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## My Role in Society

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## *My Role in Society*

**D**arrel came into my room. “You sleep with a bag on your head most of the day,” he said. We stared at each other a moment.

“What?”

“You sleep with a bag on your head most of the day,” he said. “A few hours a day I take it off and talk to you and you can have lunch. The rest of the time you sleep with the bag on your head. That’s your role in society.”

No one—no one at work, none of my friends, certainly no one in my family—had said anything about this to me.

I asked Darrel if he was being literal.

“Absolutely,” he said, putting a bag over my head.

My wife was a very dear woman who went to swim classes where, no matter how correctly and forcefully she performed the classic swimming movements, she stayed in one spot in the pool. The instructor worked with her constantly, but she could not move through the water. Toward the end of class, to save her from too much frustration, the instructor would tow her a little way while she swam, on the principle that perhaps momentum might help click into place whatever was so stubbornly not clicking into place. It did not. On the day of the diving test, she struggled aimlessly at the surface.

No one could diagnose the exact difficulty, but everyone involved wanted to overcome it. More and more of my wife’s time was devoted to swimming lessons. “You’re so busy anyway,” she said, “with that bag on your head all the time.”

A priest came to visit me. He was there to comfort me and I was eager to be comforted. He told me he’d had a headache his entire life. Literally, from the second he was born, and so he had no idea that he had a headache. He just thought that’s what heads felt like. The word “headache” meant nothing to him. The only way he knew he had a headache was that on the morning of 9/11, just before the first plane hit, the headache went away. It was gone for about five hours, and they were, he said, the happiest hours of his life. He couldn’t even really pay attention to the horror unfolding in New York and Pennsylvania and DC. He still, to that

day, so many years later, couldn't help but think back on 9/11 fondly. Indeed, the years after had been some of the most difficult of his life because now he knew it was possible to not have a headache and that he definitely had one.

Trying to understand how I was being comforted, I asked him if this was a parable.

"No," he said. "My head's killing me. I have a headache this big," and he held his hands as far apart as he could reach.

My daughter came to see me. She was grown, getting ready to begin a new job writing for a prominent magazine. She was very patient explaining her work, though a lot of it was beyond me.

"I'm a cultural analyst," she said.

"Aha," I said, but that was the sort of thing I'd been saying her whole life and she knew I was lost.

"Imagine an actor," she said. "Say, a big star like Paul Freed. Imagine Paul Freed makes a movie that is a critical success but underperforms at the box office. Well, it's my job to explain what that means."

"Doesn't it mean that he made a movie that was a critical success but underperformed at the box office?"

"That's what it is. Everyone knows that. I write about what it means."

"What it means...for Paul Freed?"

"Primarily," she said, sounding disappointed in me. "But it's my job to see the totality."

"Aha," I said.

She sighed. "Not everyone just wants to sleep with a bag on his head most of the day."

"You think I want to?"

"Can we talk about something else, please? How's Mom? How are her classes going?"

Perhaps trying to make up for that visit, my daughter later put me in touch with a friend and colleague of hers, a reporter looking to write about someone like me. He spent several weeks with me, reporting about my life. That's what I thought. When the story came out, it was actually more about bags and their place in our culture. My life was spliced throughout to provide, the reporter explained, a narrative through line.

"It's been a big success," he said. "People find you very pathetic. You should be proud."

He left a copy of the magazine with me, but when Darrel took the bag off my head, I could not get my eyes to focus on the tiny print. I asked Darrel if he would read the story aloud to me.

“I never read stuff like that,” he said. “Too depressing.”

My fame was short-lived, but I was chosen to be in the audience of a town-hall debate in that year’s Senate race. I was told I would be able to ask a question of either candidate, but it would have to be prescreened by both campaigns and it would have to be about bags.

The only question I could think of about bags was, did it do anyone any good for me to have one on my head all day?

Darrel said no way was he even going to send that to the campaigns. “It would just tick them off. Can’t you think of anything less inflammatory?”

I told him I didn’t have any other questions about bags. In fact, I was willing to bet I knew more about bags than either candidate, since I spent most of the day with one on my head. What did he think was a good question?

“You could ask them what their favorite thing is to put in a bag,” Darrel said.

“At a political debate?”

“It’s town-hall style.”

The question we finally agreed on was, “How would you support new bag technologies, and do you think they could be a significant driver of the economy?” The campaigns took a few days to get back to us. When they did, they said it was a good question, but there were other, more pressing ones to address at the debate. Also, it would be a distraction if I were there and didn’t ask a question, so would I kindly stay away?

I didn’t really notice a difference, but after the debate fell apart, everyone said I wasn’t doing well. I’d become depressed and not myself. I was worse, they said, than even in the beginning, before the priest helped me gain some perspective. The priest came back and drew me a map of his head to show where it hurt the most and when. My daughter came by to try to distract me by explaining what a novelist’s recent advance meant. My wife sent a nice note encouraging me not to give up, that she was certain she was going to start moving forward soon and she knew I would do the same. Darrel made an effort to make lunch more exciting, bringing ethnic food a couple of times and talking a lot more.

After we ate some Thai food one day, I asked him if his role in society was to care for me, to come by and remove my bag for lunch every day, make sure there was enough food, and monitor my health.

“God, no,” he said. “Can you imagine? I’m still with the grocery. I’m regional manager now. Five stores.”

“Why do you do this?” I asked.

He shrugged. “It’s extracurricular.”

“Like a hobby?”

He shrugged again.

“Can I have a hobby?” I asked.

“Of course,” he said, putting the bag back over my head.

So I took up drawing. When I couldn’t sleep, which was often—I had the bag on twenty-two hours at a stretch and there was only so much I could sleep—I would draw. Pencil worked best because it was clean and I could feel the impressions I made on the paper.

I became prolific. I drew mainly animals. Real animals and mythical animals and completely invented animals. I drew them running wild in forests and deserts and cities and beaches. I drew them in numberless herds and in magnificent solitude.

I looked at only one of my drawings when my bag was off, and even that one I looked at just for a second. I saw enough to know it was not what I had drawn. After that, I made sure my sketch pad was closed when Darrel came by to take off my bag and eat lunch.

I was not even curious one day when he was flipping through my pad, as he often did when he was done eating, and said, “This one’s not bad.” He tilted first the pad and then his head. “It’s not bad. What’s it of?”

“The view inside my bag,” I said.

He looked from my drawing to me. “You mean this is what you see?”

I shrugged, enjoying his surprise. “I never saw anything like that before the bag,” I said.

Darrel closed my sketch pad and set it aside to pick up and look inside my bag. “I’m not sure that’s right,” he said. “It’s supposed to be an empty bag.”

“It is empty.” That much I was grateful for. I had consoled myself often that my bag was not full of nails or clams or mulch.

“But you’re seeing these images inside,” Darrel said. “This is not what society had in mind.”

“The drawings aren’t for society. They’re for me.”

Darrel stood up. “I have to look into this,” he said.

He stepped out of the room for a moment and returned with a much newer bag. The canvas was still creased and stiff, the lining not yet worn smooth. "I'm going to put the backup on you today," he said, putting the backup over my head. "I'm taking your bag to get looked at."

It was hard to sleep with the stiff, unfamiliar bag on my head. I drew instead. To keep from creating any more incriminating evidence, I snapped the lead off my pencil and drew with the dull wooden tip. I did my best work that way, invisible and safe from Darrel.

I had a thick folder of invisible etchings, years of work, when Darrel showed up for lunch one day, obviously nervous. He talked all the way through his sandwich about the changing economy.

"What's going on?" I asked him once I realized he had something to tell me.

"Wearing a bag on your head—it's really a young man's game."

I put down my last bite of sandwich. "There's no substitute for experience," I said.

He tapped my folder of etchings. "A lot of the creative fields fetishize youth."

"That's extracurricular!"

He put his hand on my bag and drew it slowly off the table, out of reach. "It's just not your role anymore," he said.

I stared at him for a minute to see if he was joking. He wasn't. "Some kid's going to do it now?"

"Nice young man. Lot of potential." He shifted in his seat. "He's providing all his own paper. And pencils."

Darrel's hand was still on my folder. I didn't know how I'd etch if I had to look while I worked. I really had not seen this coming. Figuratively. Literally, of course, one doesn't see much of anything coming with a bag on one's head. "Shit," I said, poking at the last of my lunch. "What am I supposed to do now?"