



Rembrandt's Hat

Rubin, in careless white cloth hat, or visorless soft round cap, however one described it, wandered with unexpressed or inexpressive thoughts up the stairs from his studio in the basement of the New York art school where he made his sculpture, to a workshop on the second floor, where he taught. Arkin, the art historian, a hypertensive bachelor of thirty-four—a man often swept by strong feeling, he thought—about a dozen years younger than the sculptor, observed him through his open office door, wearing his cap amid a crowd of art students and teachers in the hall during a change of classes. In his white hat he stands out and apart, the art historian thought. It illumines a lonely inexpressiveness arrived at after years of experience. Though it was not entirely apt he imagined a lean white animal—hind, stag, goat?—staring steadfastly but despondently through trees of a dense wood. Their gazes momentarily interlocked and parted. Rubin hurried to his workshop class.

Arkin was friendly with Rubin though they were not really friends. Not his fault, he felt; the sculptor was a very private person. When they talked, he listened, looking away, as though guarding his impressions. Attentive, apparently, he seemed to be thinking of something else—his sad life no doubt, if saddened eyes, a faded green mistakable for gray, necessarily denote sad life. Sometimes he uttered an opinion, usually a flat statement about the nature of life, or art, never much about himself; and he said absolutely nothing about his work.

"Are you working, Rubin?" Arkin was reduced to.

"Of course I'm working."

"What are you doing if I may ask?"

"I have a thing going."

There Arkin let it lie.

Once, in the faculty cafeteria, listening to the art historian discourse on the work of Jackson Pollock, the sculptor's anger had flared.

"The world of art ain't necessarily in your eyes."

"I have to believe that what I see is there," Arkin had politely responded.

"Have you ever painted?"

"Painting is my life."

Rubin, with dignity, reverted to silence. That evening, leaving the building, they tipped hats to each other over small smiles.

In recent years, after his wife had left him and costume and headress became a mode among students, Rubin had taken to wearing various odd hats from time to time, and this white one was the newest, resembling Nehru's Congress Party cap, but rounded—a cross between a cantor's hat and a bloated yarmulke; or perhaps like a French judge's in Rouault, or working doctor's in a Daumier print. Rubin wore it like a crown. Maybe it kept his head warm under the cold skylight of his large studio.

When the sculptor again passed along the crowded hall on his way down to his studio that day he had first appeared in his white cap, Arkin, who had been reading an article on Giacometti, put it down and went into the hall. He was in an ebullient mood he could not explain to himself, and told Rubin he very much admired his hat.

"I'll tell you why I like it so much. It looks like Rembrandt's hat that he wears in one of the middle-aged self-portraits, the really profound ones. May it bring you the best of luck."

Rubin, who had for a moment looked as though he was struggling to say something extraordinary, fixed Arkin in a strong stare and hurried downstairs. That ended the incident, though it did not diminish the art historian's pleasure in his observation.

Arkin later remembered that when he had come to the art school via an assistant curator's job in a museum in St. Louis, seven years ago, Rubin had been working in wood; he now welded triangular pieces of scrap iron to construct his sculptures. Working at one time with a hatchet, later a modified small meat cleaver, he had reshaped driftwood pieces, out of which he had created some arresting forms. Dr. Levis, the director of the art school, had talked the sculptor into

giving an exhibition of his altered driftwood objects in one of the downtown galleries. Arkin, in his first term at the school, had gone on the subway to see the show one winter's day. This man is an original, he thought, maybe his work will be, too. Rubin had refused a gallery vernissage, and on the opening day the place was nearly deserted. The sculptor, as though escaping his hacked forms, had retreated into a storage room at the rear of the gallery and stayed there looking at pictures. Arkin, after reflecting whether he ought to, sought him out to say hello, but seeing Rubin seated on a crate with his back to him, examining a folio of somebody's prints, silently shut the door and departed. Although in time two notices of the show appeared, one bad, the other mildly favorable, the sculptor seemed unhappy about having exhibited his work, and after that didn't for years. Nor had there been any sales. Recently, when Arkin had suggested it might be a good idea to show what he was doing with his welded iron triangles, Rubin, after a wildly inexpressive moment, had answered, "Don't bother playing around with that idea."

The day after the art historian's remarks in the hall about Rubin's white cap, it disappeared from sight—gone totally; for a while he wore on his head nothing but his heavy reddish hair. And a week or two later, though he could momentarily not believe it, it seemed to Arkin that the sculptor was avoiding him. He guessed the man was no longer using the staircase to the right of his office but was coming up from the basement on the other side of the building, where his corner workshop room was anyway, so he wouldn't have to pass Arkin's open door. When he was certain of this Arkin felt uneasy, then experienced moments of anger.

Have I offended him in some way? he asked himself. If so, what did I say that's so offensive? All I did was remark on the hat in one of Rembrandt's self-portraits and say it looked like the cap he was wearing. How can that be offensive?

He then thought: No offense where none's intended. All I have is good will to him. He's shy and may have been embarrassed in some way—maybe my exuberant voice in the presence of students—if that's so it's no fault of mine. And if that's not it, I don't know what's the matter except his own nature. Maybe he hasn't been feeling well, or it's some momentary mishigas—nowadays there are more ways of insults without meaning to than ever before—so why raise up a sweat over it? I'll wait it out.

But as weeks, then months went by and Rubin continued to shun the art historian—he saw the sculptor only at faculty meetings when

Rubin attended them; and once in a while glimpsed him going up or down the left staircase; or sitting in the Fine Arts secretary's office poring over inventory lists of supplies for sculpture—Arkin thought: Maybe the man is having a breakdown. He did not believe it. One day they met in the men's room and Rubin strode out without a word. Arkin felt for the sculptor surges of hatred. He didn't like people who didn't like him. Here I make a sociable, innocent remark to the son of a bitch—at worst it might be called innocuous—and to him it's an insult. I'll give him tit for tat. Two can play.

But when he had calmed down, Arkin continued to wonder and worry over what might have gone wrong. I've always thought I was fairly good in human relationships. Yet he had a worrisome nature and wore a thought ragged if in it lurked a fear the fault was his own. Arkin searched the past. He had always liked the sculptor, even though Rubin offered only his fingertip in friendship; yet Arkin had been friendly, courteous, interested in his work, and respectful of his dignity, almost visibly weighted with unspoken thoughts. Had it, he often wondered, something to do with his mentioning—suggesting—not long ago, the possibility of a new exhibition of his sculpture, to which Rubin had reacted as though his life was threatened?

It was then he recalled he had never told Rubin how he had felt about his hacked-driftwood show—never once commented on it, although he had signed the guest book. Arkin hadn't liked the show, yet he wanted to seek Rubin out to name one or two interesting pieces. But when he had located him in the storage room, intently involved with a folio of prints, lost in hangdog introspection so deeply he had been unwilling, or unable, to greet whoever was standing at his back—Arkin had said to himself, Better let it be. He had ducked out of the gallery. Nor had he mentioned the driftwood exhibition thereafter. Was this kindness cruel?

Still it's not very likely he's been avoiding me so long for that alone, Arkin reflected. If he was disappointed, or irritated, by my not mentioning his driftwood show, he would then and there have stopped talking to me, if he was going to stop. But he didn't. He seemed as friendly as ever, according to his measure, and he isn't a dissembler. And when I afterwards suggested the possibility of a new show he obviously wasn't eager to have—which touched him to torment on the spot—he wasn't at all impatient with me but only started staying out of my sight after the business of his white cap, whatever that meant to him. Maybe it wasn't my mention of the cap itself that's annoyed him. Maybe it's a cumulative thing—three minuses for me?

Arkin felt it was probably cumulative; still it seemed that the cap remark had mysteriously wounded Rubin most, because nothing that had happened before had threatened their relationship, such as it was, and it was then at least amicable. Having thought it through to this point, Arkin had to admit he did not know why Rubin acted as strangely as he was now acting.

Off and on, the art historian considered going down to the sculptor's studio and there apologizing to him if he had said something inept, which he certainly hadn't meant to do. He would ask Rubin if he'd mind telling him what bothered him; if it was something *else* he had inadvertently said or done, he would apologize and clear things up. It would be mutually beneficial.

One early spring day he made up his mind to visit Rubin after his seminar that afternoon, but one of his students, a bearded printer, had found out it was Arkin's thirty-fifth birthday and presented the art historian with a white ten-gallon Stetson that the student's father, a traveling salesman, had brought back from Waco, Texas.

"Wear it in good health, Mr. Arkin," said the student. "Now you're one of the good guys."

Arkin was wearing the hat, going up the stairs to his office accompanied by the student who had given it to him, when they encountered the sculptor, who grimaced in disgust.

Arkin was upset, though he felt at once that the force of this uncalled-for reaction indicated that, indeed, the hat remark had been taken by Rubin as an insult. After the bearded student left Arkin he placed the Stetson on his worktable—it had seemed to him—before going to the men's room; and when he returned the cowboy hat was gone. The art historian searched for it in his office and even hurried back to his seminar room to see whether it could possibly have landed up there, someone having snatched it as a joke. It was not in the seminar room. Arkin thought of rushing down and confronting Rubin nose to nose in his studio, but could not bear the thought. What if he hadn't taken it?

Now both evaded each other. But after a period of rarely meeting they began, ironically, Arkin thought, to encounter one another everywhere—even in the streets, especially near galleries on Madison, or Fifty-seventh, or in SoHo; or on entering or leaving movie houses. Each then hastily crossed the street to skirt the other. In the art school both refused to serve together on committees. One, if he entered the lavatory and saw the other, stepped outside and remained a distance

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dark office, Arkin felt he had, in truth, made a referential error, confusing the two hats. Even so, what had Rubín, who no doubt was acquainted with the self-portraits, or may have had a recent look at them—at *what* had he taken offense?

Whether I was right or wrong, so what if his white cap made me think of Rembrandt's hat and I told him so? That's not throwing rocks at his head, so what bothered him? Arkin felt he ought to be able to figure it out. Therefore suppose Rubín was Arkin and Arkin Rubín—Suppose it was me in his hat: "Here I am, an aging sculptor with only one show, which I never had confidence in and nobody saw. And standing close by, making critical pronouncements one way or another, is this art historian Arkin, a big-nosed, gawky, overcurious gent, friendly but no friend of mine because he doesn't know how to be. That's not his talent. An interest in art we have in common, but not much more. Anyway, Arkin, maybe not because it means anything in particular—who says he knows what he means?—mentions Rembrandt's hat on my head and wishes me good luck in my work. So say he meant well—but it's still more than I can take. In plain words it irritates me. The mention of Rembrandt, considering the quality of my own work, and what I am generally feeling about life, is a fat burden on my soul because it makes me ask myself once too often—why am I going on if this is the kind of sculptor I am going to be for the rest of my life? And since Arkin makes me think the same unhappy thing no matter what he says—or even what he doesn't say, as for instance about my driftwood show—who wants to hear more? From then on I avoid the guy—like forever."

After staring in the mirror in the men's room, Arkin wandered on every floor of the building, and then wandered down to Rubín's studio. He knocked on the door. No one answered. After a moment he tested the knob; it gave, he thrust his head into the room and called Rubín's name. Night lay on the skylight. The studio was lit with many dusty bulbs but Rubín was not present. The forest of sculptures was. Arkin went among the iron flowers and broken stone garden pieces to see if he had been wrong in his judgment. After a while he felt he hadn't been.

He was staring at the dwarf tree when the door opened and Rubín, wearing his railroad engineer's cap, in astonishment entered.

"It's a beautiful sculpture," Arkin got out, "the best in the room I'd say."

Rubín stared at him in flushed anger, his face lean; he had grown long reddish sideburns. His eyes were for once green rather than gray. His mouth worked nervously but he said nothing.

"Excuse me, Rubín, I came in to tell you I got those hats I mentioned to you some time ago mixed up."

"Damn right you did."

"Also for letting things get out of hand for a while."

"Damn right."

Rubín, though he tried not to, then began to cry. He wept silently, his shoulders shaking, tears seeping through his coarse fingers on his face. Arkin had taken off.

They stopped avoiding each other and spoke pleasantly when they met, which wasn't often. One day Arkin, when he went into the men's room, saw Rubín regarding himself in the mirror in his white cap, the one that seemed to resemble Rembrandt's hat. He wore it like a crown of failure and hope.