

INCOMPETENT, IRRELEVANT

By Bette-Jane Raphael

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In the fifth grade I got a U in sewing. (This explains, for those of you who have expressed interest, why, when I wear my newly cuffed slacks, one of my ankles shows.) I wish I could say that I did not deserve that U, that it was given to me by a sour, ugly old teacher who was jealous of my good looks and popularity. But the truth of the matter is that although Mrs. Friedman was rather terrible to look at, somehow contriving to combine the physiognomy of a trout with the texture of a prune, I, pudgy of form and medicated of face, was something more inspirational of pity than jealousy. I was also the lousiest sewer on the fourth floor of P. S. 193.

The garment in question was innocent enough, a solid-colored apron, with one pocket, two strings which tied at the waist (extra long, considering my waist at the time), and an edge at the bottom—all in contrasting fabric. In a fit of euphoric optimism, I chose to make this little number out of white voile, with a red-and-white-patterned

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chintz for pocket, strings, and edging. I will not go into the sorry happenings of the next two months. Suffice it to say that by the time I finished that apron, it looked like some schmata that had been tied around the head of every camel driver east of Suez. Besides the abuse it received from my perpetually grubby fingers, it was further enfeebled by the fact that I had still not mastered anything more complicated than the running stitch.

Running is something I've been doing ever since—running from the spectre of my own incompetence, which trips me up every time I try to make a goal, an impression, a contribution. (I have never again tried to make an apron.) Whether this spectre started growing with The Great Sewing Debacle of 1955 I can't say. It was certainly my most undiluted failure to that date, but it was backed up by a host of other inabilities which had become all too apparent by the time I was ten. These included, first and foremost, a complete lack of physical coordination, a lack which made even a minor staircase look like Mount Fuji. Among the fleet of foot, I had the cloven hoof—always the last picked for any team sport, always careful not to show I cared—to this day I will not get on a

tennis court unless it is located someplace where nobody knows me—like Yemen.

Also clear, was that when it came to possessing any kind of artistic talent, I had much in common with a stone. In her innocent desire to find me a creative outlet, my mother merely provided me with failures which further advanced my steadily growing feeling of incompetence. By the time I was twelve, it had been proved with perfect certainty that I could not toe, tap, or ballroom dance, play the piano or the saw, impersonate Tallulah Bankhead, or indeed do anything at all that could get me on Ted Mack's Amateur Hour. (Earlier on, I actually had auditioned—singing, yet—for something called The Children's Hour, a kind of junior Ted Mack's sponsored by Horn & Hardart. I was turned down, which is why I'm now secretly pleased by what appears to be the imminent demise of that cafeteria chain.) Soon, any possible areas of achievement I may have possessed became overshadowed by my failures. I had developed a full-grown incompetence syndrome. I have lived with it—like diabetes, kept under control but basically incurable—for the past twenty years.

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WANT AND IMMATERIAL

I.S., incompetence syndrome, has some unique facets. For one thing, a person who feels incompetent takes responsibility for everything that goes wrong in the immediate vicinity, which in my case is the northeastern United States. If the chairlift breaks down in Mt. Kisco, if negotiations break down at the U.N., if a woman breaks down on the Long Island Rail Road, my immediate reaction is a fear that it's because of something I've done, or forgotten to do. Ignoring the advice of experts in every field, I take *everything* personally. And if my imagined failings are burdensome, actual errors are crushing. A mistake to me is not merely an error, it is proof positive that I am unfit to live. A forgotten task at work, a social gaffe, the loss of an umbrella are things for which I do not forgive myself easily, if ever. All of which can make life a heavy load.

Feeling incompetent, however, does have its advantages. One is that it makes me careful. For instance, always assuming that I have left something undone, I rarely leave my apartment without going back to check either that the door is really locked, that gas is not escaping from the oven, or that the light has not been left on in the bathroom. As a result, I can say

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proudly that I have never been burgled via my front door, only through my windows and my skylight. Furthermore, I have yet to find my apartment filled with gas when I get home at night.

But these triumphs are minor when compared with the burdens of feeling incompetent, the heaviest being the constant fear of discovery. Every person I meet is potentially that person who will unmask me and expose to the world that I am not what I appear, that behind the façade of an at-ease, self-assured, purposeful, possibly even amusing career woman, there lives a cringing dummy who has never read Sylvia Plath, takes an hour to get through the *New York Times*, has to look up the spelling of *naive*, and who, underneath her overblouse, is short-waisted. Everyone I meet, therefore, I hurriedly assume, for purposes of self-protection, is smarter, more knowledgeable, and more accomplished than I am. In fact, it takes a great deal of evidence, in the form of gross and overt stupidity, to convince me otherwise.

Yet if I believe that everybody was put on this earth for the sole purpose of judging me, it is nothing to the judgment and scrutiny to which I constantly

submit myself. John J. Sirica is a mealy-mouthed buck-passer compared to me and the internal court which holds daily session inside my head. Every move I make, every word, every decision, every piece of work I produce is constantly being judged, weighed, and usually found wanting.

An important fact about feeling incompetent is that nobody can convince you otherwise. It's about the only thing you are confident about. It's rather like feeling fat. I know a girl who looks as if she were brought up in the Bible belt and only fed pages of the Bible. She is so thin that I find it hard to be civil to her. And yet she is convinced she is overweight and proves it by eating, everyday for breakfast, one corn flake. I'm that way when it comes to incompetence. No matter how many deluded employers may praise me, no matter how many tasks I may perform successfully, no matter how many spiritual and material rewards I may reap, my faith in my own incompetence remains totally unshaken.

Example: Recently I was driving in a car with a friend looking for a particular turnoff. I had only the vaguest idea where it was, but my friend didn't have a clue, so when I saw a road that looked

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somewhat familiar, I took my courage in my hands and said, "Uh, I could be mistaken, I probably am, but this might possibly be it. Maybe—unless you don't think so—maybe we should turn here. Do you think we should turn here?" After this forceful, confident piece of directing, we did turn, and we found it was the correct road. My friend looked at me with admiration and said, "Right you are!" At her words I felt an instant burst of confusion. "Me? Right?" I thought in panic. "No, she's got me mixed up with somebody else. Maybe I'm not here at all." Then it occurred to me that I am never surprised when I am wrong, only when I am right. That is why phrases like "Good thinking!" and "That's the ticket!" paralyze me, and I accept compliments the way Germany accepted the Versailles treaty.

Lest you think that I have simply lived with I.S. all my life without trying to overcome it, let me tell you that I have tried everything from Freudian analysis to mineral waters to alleviate the problem. My Freudian felt he could treat me, but I refused to get married, which he said was essential to the cure. The mineral waters just made me nauseous. I was even thinking of taking a fling at est, until I learned that est people believe a person is totally responsible for everything that happens to him, and frankly I couldn't live with that. It's enough to believe that I'm responsible for whatever happens to

everybody else.

I'm beginning to think that in order to affect a cure for I.S. I will have to take definitive action myself, perhaps start an I.A. (Incompetents Anonymous) organization, where people like myself can get up, trip over their chairs, fall up steps leading to a podium, and finally arrive in front of forty or so other people to declare "I am an incompetent." Then everyone could drink coffee and spill it all over each other.

For I am convinced that I am not alone, and that secret incompetents, like secret drinkers, inhabit the closets of America. Who are these people? Well, for one thing, in my opinion they are mostly women. That might sound sexist, but I believe it is based on sound cultural principles as well as on personally gathered, individual data. Culturally, women in this country have been brought up on the idea that they are genetically unequipped to deal with anything more complicated than pop-up tarts, and that if, God forbid, nobody in the aluminum siding or men's outerwear business wants to marry them, the best they can hope to do is tread the waters of life. I bought this malarkey, in part anyway, which explains why I am a firm believer in my own inabilities. And if what they have told me is true, a lot of other seemingly together women bought it also.

For instance, there is my friend Amy. Amy is a terrific writer, an inventive thinker and—to my mind possibly the most awe inspiring—a marvelous cook. One day I complimented her on

her cooking, bemoaning the fact that my own culinary art fell somewhere below that of a Sabrett hot dog cart. She looked at me with incredulity. "What are you talking about?" she said. "Half of everything I cook falls on the floor at one point or another during the time I prepare it. I'm an absolute clod in the kitchen." Now I have eaten Amy's spaghetti in pesto sauce, and I wouldn't trade it for a lifetime supply of Famous Amos chocolate chip cookies, so you see what I mean about the intransigence of I.S. You also see why Amy is my friend.

Not that I would want to be friends with all incompetents, since they are as varied as they are legion. Other secret incompetents, I suspect, include Barbara Walters (because she's being paid a million dollars—and who can believe they're worth *that?*), Greta Garbo (because she refused to make any more movies and risk having people find out she wasn't as beautiful as she looked), Sara Lee (because she feels the need to overcompensate by using real butter), and Phyllis Schlafly (because she's so scared of being equal).

However, despite all the incompetents out there, I may not start I.A. after all. For one thing, I don't really believe that incompetents are joiners. We have so much to hide that we prefer to stay away from large groups, where the possibility of detection is proportionate to the number of people present. For another thing, I am learning to live with my disability. This means that I have come to terms with the fact that there are certain things I will never be able to do, like filling an ice cube tray without spilling any water on the floor or eliciting cordiality from a stewardess.

Lastly, the reason I will never start I.A. is this: I'm just not competent enough to do it.

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