

SY SAFRANSKY'S NOTEBOOK

INSPIRATION CAME LOOKING FOR ME. BUT I WAS LISTENING to the weather report. I was counting out my vitamins. I was leafing through the Daytimer catalog, wondering if I should order a new appointment book. Inspiration got tired of waiting.

I'M STRUGGLING WITH THE ESSAY. THE ELEVATOR IS waiting to carry me into the mine shaft, but I'm stalling. *It's dark down there*, I protest, as if I've just discovered darkness.

TWO WEEKS OF WORK DOWN THE DRAIN. I'M READY to strangle the man who claims he's a writer: he'll be dead, I'll be in prison, and we'll both be better off. Maybe I won't even be convicted. Maybe the jury will see it was a mercy killing.

IN THE CARTOON, THE PSYCHIATRIST TELLS HIS patient, "You have an inferiority complex." The patient asks, "What causes that?" The psychiatrist replies, "Inferiority."

SO THE WORDS WON'T COME. SO WHAT? DOES THE world need more of my words? Look at them standing in line at the soup kitchen, slouching in doorways, sprawled on the street in the pale morning light: the right words, the almost-right words, the words that never should have been spoken.

AS LONG AS I'M STILL TRYING TO CURRY FAVOR — with my dead father, with my admiring readers — I'm not writing from the heart, not really. What a busy little gardener I've become, pruning these sentences with such care, clippers always at the ready, clip clip. But beyond the rose garden is the meadow and beyond the meadow is the forest and deep inside the forest is the river and the river runs to the sea. I can't get to the sea by working on my roses, by making them picture perfect.

THERE'S A ROMAN IN ME. HE CRUCIFIES THE JESUS IN me. I learn to forgive him. This is hard to do.

I'VE BEEN AWAY FROM MYSELF TOO LONG. NOW IT'S hard to find the door. And when I find the door, it's locked. And when I knock, a hoarse voice answers. I ask him to let me in. He wants to know why I left. In that hotel room three thousand miles from home, was I closer to the living God, or was it God, too, I wanted a vacation from? Is that why I smoked so much and drank so much and ate so much? Is that why I didn't take a moment to sit quietly and pray?

THE GOD OF LOVE DOESN'T CARE WHAT I'VE ACCOMPLISHED. The God of Love cares only that I'm awake. Are my eyes open? Is my heart open?

I DREAMT THAT I WAS TRYING TO DESTROY THE DEVIL. But no matter how many different ways I tried to kill him, he came back. I cut him into a thousand pieces. He resurrected himself. I set him on fire. He returned the next day. Then I found myself in a room full of people sitting trance-like in front of a tv. This is how the devil was getting through to them! I yelled at everyone to stop watching; they ignored me. I threw something at the tv; it bounced off. There was a knock at the door. Somehow I knew it was Jesus, but before I could let him in, I woke up. I lay in bed, wide-eyed, staring at the ceiling. I wondered, if I had opened the door, what Jesus would have done. In my mind's eye, I saw him walk into the room. He didn't yell. He didn't throw anything. He didn't even glance at the tv. He stood there quietly, studying the faces fixed on the screen. None of the people noticed he was there, but that didn't seem to bother him. He just stood there, the light around his body growing brighter.

EARLY IN THE MORNING OR LATE AT NIGHT, WITH A pen or a computer, in this chair or that chair — it doesn't matter. I don't know where life is leading me, and I don't know where this sentence is leading me, only that it will end.

"PRACTICING GRATITUDE," Y. CALLS IT. EVERY DAY SHE sets aside time to be grateful. For the view from her window. For the food on her plate. For the frayed socks on her feet. That makes sense to me. This morning, I'll be grateful for my healthy body, for ten fingers and ten toes and all the other standard equipment. I'll be grateful for the comforting sound of the coffee maker, automatically programmed to wake up the same time every day, just like me — a machine that dispenses my favorite drug, no prescription needed, no dealer to meet. I'll even be grateful for this cold, wet weather. What a bully it is, shoving its finger into my chest, daring me to go running despite the chill. I can be thankful the morning has a mind of its own, that it's not pretending to be something it isn't. I can learn something from a morning like this.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO ASK FOR HELP WITH MY WRITING? It doesn't mean asking God to whisper words into my ear. It doesn't mean lying down and taking a nap while he hunches over my laptop, fingers flying: *God, can he type*. The truth is, I don't know what it means. But I'm asking.