

SY SAFRANSKY'S NOTEBOOK

I STAYED UP LATE WATCHING A MEDIOCRE MOVIE I'D seen before. I ate, though I wasn't hungry. This was my escape from loneliness — the refrigerator comforting me with sweets, Hollywood comforting me with the sweet milk of pretending.

ONE WAY TO END THE WAR WITH MYSELF ABOUT overeating is to eat slowly and without distraction, with no newspaper or magazine in front of me. I can invite myself to actually taste the food; to pause between bites; to remember why I'm here — at this table, in this body, on this planet. Sure, the food on my plate will nourish me whether or not I pay attention to it. But how much more might I be nourished if I remembered that, with each bite, God is feeding me?

"SELF-DISCIPLINE," MY FRIEND ROBERT SAYS, "IS REMEMBERING what you really want."

I LOVE MAKING LISTS IN THE MORNING. BENT OVER my notepad, I'm like a god in charge of a perfectly ordered universe. Then the day rushes in, and my ambitions seem ridiculous. What the hell was God thinking?

DESPITE ALL THE THERAPY, AND ALL THE SPIRITUAL teachings, and all the legal drugs, and all the illegal drugs, I still don't accept myself. This, too, is hard to accept.

"I FELT LIKE A FRAUD," SAYS A MAN IN A JULES FEIFFER cartoon. "So I learned to fly an airplane. At fifty-thousand feet I thought: *A fraud is flying an airplane.* So I crossed the Atlantic in a rowboat. I docked at Cherbourg and thought: *A fraud has crossed the Atlantic in a rowboat.* So I took a space shot to the moon. On the trip home I thought: *A fraud has circled the moon.* So I took a full page ad in the newspaper and confessed to the world that I was a fraud! I read the ad and I thought: *A fraud is pretending to be honest.*"

SELF-IMPROVEMENT IS MY DRUG OF CHOICE, MORE addictive than coffee, more seductive than marijuana. But imagining that I'll be happier once I become a "better" man is an illusion. When someone I love dies, will it comfort me to remember that I went to the gym three times this week instead of two? When I die, will my daughters be heartened to know I was at my ideal weight? I'm tired of all my rules, tired of making them, of breaking them, of fixing their broken bones and teaching them to walk again. My vow this week: to

be with the world as it is, and to be with myself as I am.

I WANDERED DOWN THE HALLWAY AND STOOD BEFORE the portraits of my ancestors, and noticed that each of them was crooked, and spent many years trying to straighten them. And all that time, I forgot how quickly time was passing. Finally, I turned and climbed the winding stairs and saw my true love waiting for me. She opened her arms. I smiled my lopsided smile.

I DREAMT THAT I ASKED THE POET ROBERT BLY TO explain the secret of his creativity. He answered, exuberantly, that he couldn't, but that it didn't really matter, did it? He was smiling broadly, his big body crackling with energy. It was as if I'd asked a dancing bear to explain dancing.

WHAT IF I ACTED AS IF I HAD NO FUTURE — NOT JUST because I might be dead tomorrow, but because the future won't really change anything? There are good days and bad days; they all end. Outer circumstances change, but the fact that outer circumstances change doesn't change. What life asks of me tomorrow won't be any different than what life asks of me today: to be here, now.

I GET UP EARLY. I WAIT FOR THE LIGHT. I STILL TRUST the dawn more than I trust religion, more than I trust philosophy. Every morning the darkness disappears; morning never lets me down.

HAPPY BIRTHDAY, JOSHUA. NO, I HAVEN'T FORGOTTEN. I still remember driving your mother to the hospital that day, frantic with worry, thinking, *This isn't supposed to be happening yet*, and I remember telling myself to stop thinking and just drive. I remember the long wait outside the delivery room — no, they wouldn't let me in — and I remember the machines that kept you alive, the blinking lights that kept blinking blinking blinking until, on the morning of the third day, they stopped. Thirty years, Joshua. And for all these years you've been a teacher for me, a different kind of teacher than the gurus from the East, with their accents and robes; a different kind of teacher than my daughters and my wives and everyone else I've loved and been loved by. One day, you squeezed my finger with your little hand; the next day, you died. That's one lesson I've taken to heart, my crash course in impermanence. So I thank you, my teacher. Happy birthday, my son.